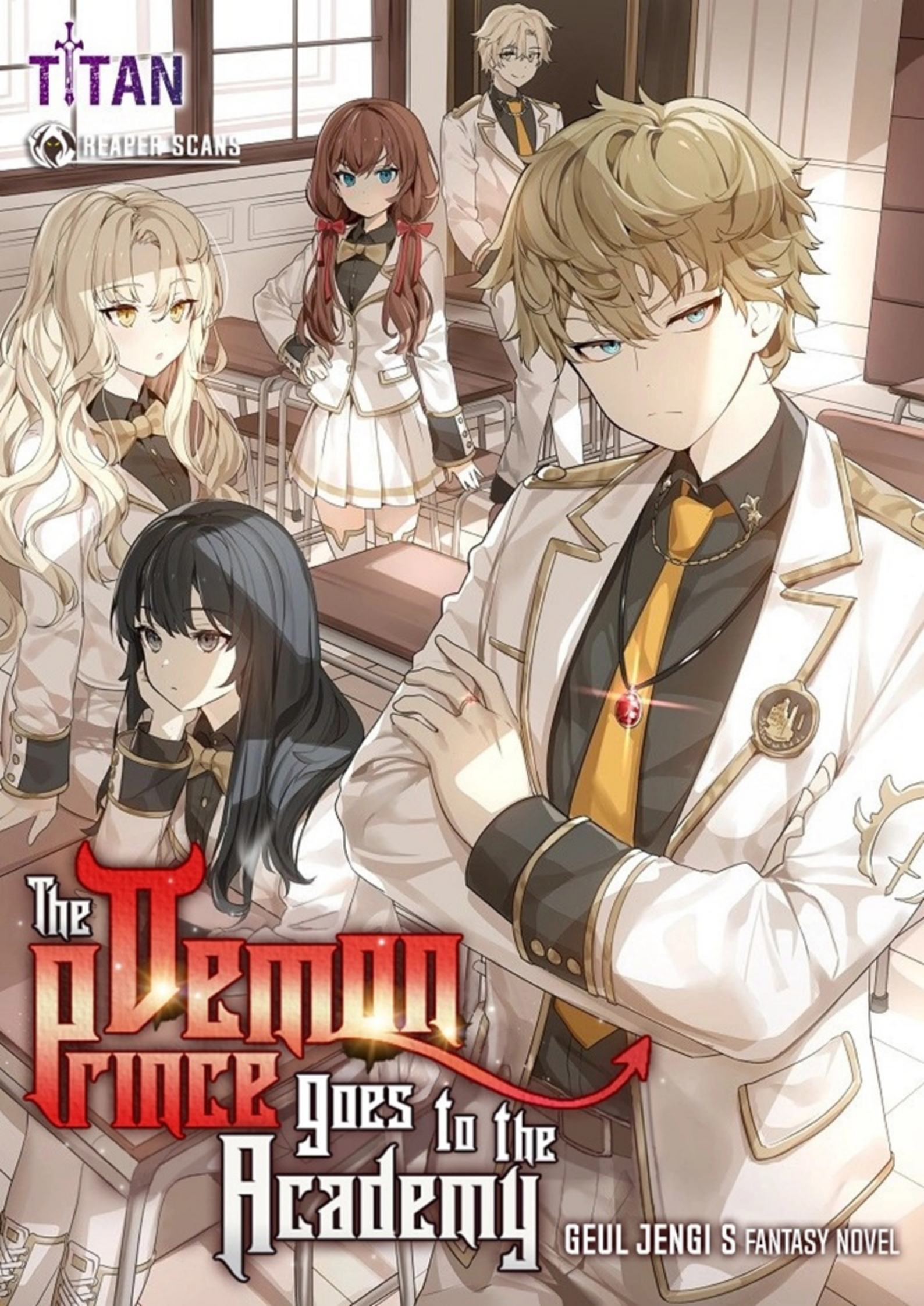
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

–마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 9 -

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RONOPU

[SUBUDAI11]

Chapter 401

“Huu…”

Twelve resurrected corpses in total.

Their physical abilities were greatly enhanced, making them too difficult for ordinary soldiers to face. However, they were no match for Olivia and me.

There may be countless beings stronger than me, but I, too, belong to the realm of superhumans who are on a completely different level compared to ordinary people.

I took down five, Olivia six, and the awakened guards apprehended one, which I finished off. Just as the corpses purified by Tiamata's power ceased to move, Olivia seemed to have drawn upon the power of Tu'an to halt their movements.

However, the situation was gruesome.

The area was littered with corpses that had been bitten on the neck, had their heads smashed, or limbs torn apart.

There must have been at least fifty corpses.

A massacre had taken place in a very short span of time.

Many had fled, but countless others sat frozen in place, their legs having given out from sheer terror.

If they had believed these people were followers of the devil and killed them, they would have had to consider the possibility that something horrifying beyond their comprehension might occur. Although I didn't feel like mocking those who were paralyzed with fear when such an event actually transpired, I couldn't help but feel a surge of indignation.

“Th-Thank you for saving us… What on earth is this…?”

Although many of the dead were armed guards who had been near the awakened

corpses, those who managed to regain their composure had fought with their weapons.

The person who appeared to be in charge, as well as the other guards, still wore expressions of terror.

“First, tend to the people. I don't have time to explain who I am.”

“Yes, yes, sir!”

Not everyone recognizes sacred artifacts. They might not know what to make of the Tiamata in my hand, but they would likely consider it an unusual object.

I hadn't planned to make an appearance in this manner, but I suppose I would become known as a hero who leaped into an unexpected massacre to vanquish the undead.

Olivia approached me from a distance.

“Reinhardt… This must be…”

Olivia trailed off.

I knew what she wanted to say.

The possibility of dark magic couldn't be dismissed, but she seemed to focus on another possibility.

The power to revive the dead.

It was also the power once exhibited by the cursed Tiamata, and it belonged to Kier, the nemesis of Tu'an.

It was highly likely that the divine power of the devil was being used. This meant that the real cult of the devil might be involved in this situation.

And furthermore.

Although the situation in the square had been resolved, there were no signs of additional guards arriving.

“Aaaahhhh!”

“Please, save me!”

“Run for your lives!”

Screams could be heard in the distance.

Olivia must have sensed the mixture of awe and terror directed at us by the guards and the people whose legs had given out.

Her eyes were filled with sorrow.

The people must now understand what they were up against.

It was unlikely that they recognized Olivia and me.

In the terrible situation, people gazed upon the men and women of the mysterious order who appeared like salvation and displayed their immense divine power. It was clear what they would do.

“The gods have sent us angels…!”

“They have come to save us!”

People looked at us, nodding their heads and prostrating themselves. Olivia watched them with a complex expression.

Some would arbitrarily hang someone, while others would worship someone just as arbitrarily.

Olivia looked away from those people and gazed at the large square.

The area was filled with corpses that had appeared in an instant, but there were no longer any living corpses moving about.

"Let's go, Reinhardt."

They had to do something about the bizarre events unfolding in Rajeurn.

* * *

The catastrophe at the large square had been quelled, but the revived corpses exhibited physical abilities surpassing those of ordinary humans.

More importantly, it seemed these events were happening not only in the large square but throughout the entire city of Rajeurn.

“Aaargh!”

“Run for your lives!”

An uncontrollable fire was engulfing the city, its origin unknown, and the spectacle of the revived corpses biting and tearing at people was unfolding everywhere.

As dead bodies revived and attacked people, it was natural that the scale of the disaster would grow.

If this continued, Rajeurn would become a blazing inferno swarming with the resurrected corpses.

“Shit!”

"Damn it…”

As I cut down the living corpse with Tiamata, a white divine flame blazed from the severed section, burning away the evil energy.

If this was the true power of the Demon God Kier, then Kier and Tu’an would ultimately purify each other's existence with the same power.

“Aaargh!”

“Please, save me!”

Rajeurn was already in chaos, but now it was transforming into chaos mixed with slaughter.

And that wasn't all.

“Ugh”

"Damn, they're coming back to life."

The corpses that Olivia and I had dealt with did not revive, but the corpses in the streets began to grotesquely contort and move after some time had passed.

Unless purified with divine power or utterly destroyed to the point of being unrecognizable, the dead bodies would rise again after a short while.

“Crunch!”

With a hardened expression, Olivia crushed the head of a corpse that was just starting to move under her foot.

Her lips were tightly pursed, and her expression was terribly twisted. Even if they were undead, she was crushing those who had been alive just moments ago.

“Don't be afraid!”

“Cut off their limbs! Cut them off!”

One piece of good news was that the sounds of battle and shouts could be heard from somewhere.

This fight was not a simple military exercise; priests and holy knights were needed.

However, it was doubtful how many high-ranking priests would be present in the small Kingdom of Levaina. In fact, the priests who were in the large square lost their nerve and could do nothing before they were killed. They were not accustomed to battle.

"When will the empire's reinforcements arrive… or will they even come…?"

Olivia murmured with a desperate expression.

With the existence of the Warp Gate, once the news reached the Empire, support troops would arrive, and there were also the special agents from the Empire, so there would be some degree of countermeasure. But could Rajeurn survive this bizarre situation where dead corpses were coming back to life?

In Rajeurn, which had suddenly turned into a living hell, Olivia and I ran to find the source of this calamity.

While running, we encountered reanimated corpses, which we sliced, cut, and crushed.

-Rumble!

Burning houses were collapsing.

Naturally, a fire couldn't spread this quickly.

It was impossible for Rajeurn to turn into a sea of flames in an instant unless someone had intentionally set the fire in an organized manner.

"Reinhardt! Over there!"

After running for quite some time, Olivia pointed towards the end of the long, straight road.

There, a group dressed in black robes could be seen.

As someone waved their hand over an intact house, a wave of flame erupted like a tidal wave, swallowing an entire building. We could see it clearly.

Someone was setting the fire.

Was it magic?

And among those in the black robes, there was one person riding a horse.

No, not just an ordinary horse.

"A phantom steed…?"

It was a translucent horse with only a blurry, pale blue figure.

The phantom steed, as it was called.

In the midst of the group, the being riding the phantom steed turned its head

towards us from afar.

Due to the flickering flames in the distance, we couldn't see the figure inside clearly.

But it was unmistakably felt.

My intuition warned me.

It was watching me.

Both Olivia and I could see the being in the black robe spurring the phantom steed from afar.

We didn't know who it was.

But it was approaching.

"Tiamata is now in your hands."

"Right."

I was certain that Olivia wasn't a combatant without her weapon.

Tiamata was in Olivia's hands, and Alsebringer was in mine.

The phantom steed didn't run; it glided across the distance at an unbelievable speed, charging towards us.

-Swoosh!

The figure in the black robe approached us, wielding a long twin-bladed polearm. Its face was hidden within the robe, appearing as a mere black mass.

It held a spear in its left hand and a sword in its right, riding the phantom steed as it charged towards us.

In an instant, the knight closed the distance, attacking Olivia with the spear and swinging the blackened blade towards me.

-Clang!

-Screech!

My hand throbbed with pain as I was flung back, and Olivia's stance wavered significantly.

We weren't injured, but the force imbued in the weapons was difficult to withstand.

-Growl

An unknown black energy surrounded each weapon held in its hands.

"What the hell are you guys doing?"

After a single attack, it quickly created distance between us. I questioned the phantom rider, and a slow voice emerged from the darkness.

"For the Demon King."

The knight riding the charging phantom steed spoke softly.

"He desires the destruction of Levaina."

…What?

When did I!

—---

I don't even know these people.

Yet, suddenly, what kind of nonsense is it that the Demon King wants the destruction of Levaina?

I can't understand.

And if the power of the Demon Cult is this great, why have they been silent until now? Have they been expanding their influence in the meantime?

There was nothing certain, only uncertain conjectures.

However, the Phantom Rider came charging again, wielding two weapons tainted in darkness.

It was on a different level than the speed of a galloping horse.

This time, it attacked targeting only Olivia, as if it knew it had to eliminate her first.

-Hwooong!

The first attack was hard to withstand, but now, Olivia was imbuing Tiamata with a powerful divine force. Tiamata would be more efficient when used by Olivia than when I held it.

-Screech!

A fierce shockwave exploded as the sword collided with Olivia. Olivia did not back off this time, but the Phantom Rider passed by her without any significant damage.

The Rider stared at Olivia. In the pitch-black darkness, I couldn't tell what the Rider was thinking.

It seemed that the Phantom Rider had decided to confront the two of us, and the robed figures had disappeared from the edge of the street.

There was no escape.

The speed of the phantom horse the Rider rode was not that of a regular horse.

As if to ignore the laws of physics.

-Screech!

“Argh!”

In the blink of an eye, the Rider dashed and swung down his weapon, passing by in the opposite direction and then returning without any sign of inertia.

Despite moving as if unaffected by inertia, the speed and strength of the weapon were real as it swung down or thrust.

“Reinhardt! Be careful!”

-Clang!

“Argh!”

Even while maintaining my Magic Body Strengthening, just deflecting the spear the Rider thrust caused a powerful pain in my wrist, as if it would shatter.

However, the Rider's fearsome ability wasn't just in the destructive power of his attacks.

After striking once, he would terrifyingly rotate and charge without giving me a chance to recover from the impact.

-Sheeek!

“Damn it… Son of a…”

Without any backlash from his movement, the Phantom Rider thrust his spear at my face as he charged.

I don't know why, but is this right to try to kill me while claiming to be on the Demon King's side?!

-Screech!

Just before the Rider's spear pierced me, Olivia rushed in and knocked it aside.

-Kiiee!

In an instant, the Rider turned the horse's head, recovered the spear, and circled around to the side.

“Are you okay, Reinhardt?”

“Yes, for now.”

I couldn't know his full capacity, but the Phantom Rider's ability far exceeded my current level. I wasn't sure how he compared to Olivia, but it was clear that he found

her annoying.

“What should we do about that horse?”

The phantom horse moved as if ignoring the laws of physics. The Rider's strength was a problem, but in his current state, riding the phantom horse, he had an overwhelming advantage.

“I'll try to hold him somehow.”

Of course, the Tiamata that Olivia held was glowing with a white, divine light in her left hand as well.

With her Magic Body Strengthening and divine power enhancements maximized, Olivia didn't quite fit the current situation, but she looked like an angel descending upon the battlefield.

In this scene where everything around her was burning, it seemed as though she had come not for salvation, but for judgment.

Screeeech!

The phantom horse let out a strange cry, charging at Olivia and me once again.

Clash!

A deafening noise, almost unbelievable for the collision of weapons, resounded, and this time, the rider did not pass by Olivia.

No, he couldn't.

He was pushed back by the counterforce of Olivia's weapon.

But that wasn't the end.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Rather, Olivia pressed her attack so that the horse couldn't move, driving the rider into a corner. She aimed at the horse and swung her weapon, but the rider seemed to know, deftly parrying Olivia's every attack with his spear and sword.

Olivia was incredible, but so was the phantom rider.

Handling a sword and spear with both hands, he was able to skillfully block Olivia's Tiamata swings.

This was an absurd monster.

However.

A joint attack is absolute.

While the enemy focused on protecting the phantom horse from Olivia's assault, I seized the rider's back.

First, we had to knock him off the horse before we could plan our next move.

What we needed now was not strength or skill, but speed.

It's been a while since I've used this in actual combat.

Swift.

I concentrate the power of self-suggestion on speed.

Another power adds to it.

The stronger the enemy compared to me, the more Alsebringer empowers me. The enemy is clearly stronger, so the condition is sufficient.

One step.

The moment I took a step.

I seized the rider's back with a speed unfamiliar even to myself, so fast that I was astonished.

However, it seemed as if the rider reacted to my speed, swinging his spear to block my charging sword.

Grind!

“Tsk!”

It was the fastest speed I could muster, but the rider reacted to it.

But as I said before.

In the end, a joint attack is absolute.

With his left hand's spear blocked and his right hand's sword intercepting Olivia's sword strike, the phantom rider was momentarily trapped, unable to move forward or backward.

He moved as if defying the laws of physics, but he never moved sideways.

The moment I blocked his retreat.

Snap!

With her free left hand, Olivia boldly grabbed the rider's sword. Wrapped in light, she gripped the rider's sword and forcefully twisted its direction.

Slash!

With the Tiamata, she sliced off the phantom horse's neck.

Screeeeaaam!

With a chilling scream, the phantom horse turned into a blue mist and scattered, and we immediately put some distance between us.

Only then did the rider descend from the unnaturally moving horse to the ground.

Thud!

The rider in the black robe didn't say anything about being speechless. Aside from that first remark, it didn't say a single word, and its emotions and mood remained unreadable.

Clank!

Casually discarding the spear, which was longer than its own height, the rider grasped only the darkness-swirling sword.

"What are you lot?"

Olivia spoke to the rider, who silently held its sword and watched the two of us.

"Minions of the Demon King?"

Although the rider's skill was a problem, Olivia seemed to think it more important to identify who they were.

From within the robe, the mysterious rider looked at us and said,

"Yes."

This is absolutely insane.

When did I!

I don't know you people!

A stranger claims to be my subordinate.

"We will complete the task that the Prophet failed to accomplish."

The Prophet.

Judging by the fact that they called the Demon King a prophet, these people must be followers of the Demon Cult.

I didn't fully understand the situation or how it had come to this, but I seemed to have an idea of their purpose and intent.

Since the Demon King failed to raid Levaina, do these people, who consider me a prophet, intend to finish my failed task by attacking Rajeurn?

The situation is so tangled that it has come to this.

Rumble!

Black energy began to stir in the sword it held.

It was quite different from the rider’s previous momentum.

It wasn't that the rider’s combat power weakened after dismounting, but rather, it seemed as if the rider were finally about to reveal its true strength.

The weapon, oozing dark energy, seemed as if something eerie would happen the moment it met its target.

"Fine."

A sardonic smile appeared at the corner of Olivia's mouth.

"There's no way the Demon King would do that."

Olivia didn't come here to discover the truth behind this incident.

If the Demon King's minions were turning Rajeurn into a mess in real-time.

She seemed to have gained confidence that there must have been another reason why the Demon King had saved her.

She needed certainty.

And so, she had just obtained it.

No matter how hateful and disgusting human behavior may be, could the essence of all humans be evil?

However.

Although she couldn't know the essence of all demons.

Aaargh!

Sa, sa, save meeeee!

Kyaahhhhhhh!

If the Demon King was behind such actions.

The Demon King must be an evil being.

Olivia was certain.

"Moreover."

With Tiamata in hand, Olivia Lanze stared at the phantom rider with a chilling, expressionless face.

"There's no need to plead any longer for the power of divine grace."

Olivia had forsaken the gods.

But she was still using holy power, and they were lending her strength. However, it seemed like Olivia was now trying to deny even that principle.

"Light."

It wasn't a plea to save us.

It wasn't a plea to guide us.

It wasn't a plea at all.

"Come to me."

To the light, she said, follow me.

Olivia commanded.

Woo-woo-wooong!

The white light enveloping Tiamata gradually intensifies, eventually adopting a golden hue. Olivia Lanze employs Tiamata in a manner unlike my own.

By now, I know that divine power fuels Olivia in some way. Thus, there is no need to pray or to strive to believe.

Olivia has been chosen by the gods.

Chosen, so that regardless of her actions, the gods lend their power to her.

Now, she commands the power to manifest.

-Krrrrrr!

The air stirs violently as Olivia Lanze is engulfed by a torrent of immense divine power, her fierce gaze fixed on the phantom rider.

Riverrier Lanze was never like this.

Although Riverrier Lanze held the upper hand in practical abilities, the sheer divine power in Olivia surpassed Riverrier Lanze's.

Even I, standing nearby, could feel the atmosphere roiling from the tempest of divine power.

However, the wicked being before us did not back down in the face of Olivia's onslaught.

The dark energy boiling within the phantom rider was ominous, but the storm of divine power radiating from Olivia was colossal.

Already immense, Olivia's divine power, amplified through Tiamata, seemed capable of enveloping the world with just its release.

Olivia, cloaked in light, and the rider, shrouded in darkness.

The phantom rider charges towards Olivia.

But it appeared as feeble and insignificant as a small boat facing a tidal wave.

As the phantom rider advances, Olivia focuses her divine power on Tiamata.

A dazzling golden radiance begins to concentrate within Tiamata.

The divine power-imbued Tiamata, seemingly on the verge of exploding, collides with the sword of the phantom rider.

Olivia thrusts her sword from above, downwards.

A straight thrust, but wielding a pressure that seemed capable of shattering the world, she strikes down.

The moment the two swords clash.

-Flash!

I saw the storm of light engulf the world.

Chapter 402

-Whirrrrr

After the torrent of divine power swept the surroundings, I could see particles of light falling from the sky.

The storm was so powerful that it swept me up and tossed me around.

Olivia stood in the midst of the storm, staring at something in the distance.

There.

A figure stood, its black robe tattered, and its bones exposed. Black smoke rose from its eyes and the corners of its mouth.

-Hisssssss

It wasn't dead.

To begin with, it had been moving while dead.

Olivia murmured softly, staring at the motionless skeleton.

"Death Knight…"

It was a Death Knight that had been blocking our path.

As its bones slowly crumbled to ashes, we watched in silence.

The Death Knight was undoubtedly one of the highest-ranking undead. The fact that it didn't evaporate but left remains, despite Olivia's massive use of her divine power, which was extremely effective against the undead, proved its strength.

"To think that such a thing would appear where people live, the world has gone mad."

Olivia gritted her teeth and muttered.

However, the chaos was not over.

We had dealt with one Death Knight, but the city's turmoil was only accelerating.

And then.

-Screeeeech!

With a chilling, shrill sound, a phantom horse emerged from the end of the street.

"There are more!"

As if aware that we had dealt with one Death Knight or seeking to eliminate the threat, another Death Knight approached from a distance.

Moreover.

-Heeheeheeheehee!

It wasn't just one, but two.

Olivia's expression turned grave.

"What on earth…"

It took a tremendous amount of energy to deal with just one.

Olivia's face darkened as two more appeared. Two would be difficult.

Was the city of Rajeurn truly doomed today?

The two Death Knights, charging at a ferocious speed, targeted Olivia and me.

Olivia's stamina was depleted, and I was not strong enough to face the Death Knights.

If I used retreat to create an opening, could we face them?

Since they serve the Demon King, would they stop attacking if I revealed myself as

the Demon King? If so, what should I say to Olivia?

I had to make a choice.

Would Olivia be on my side?

Would she believe that I hadn't intended for this situation?

Just as I was about to remove Sarkegaar's ring to confront the two charging Death Knights.

-Swish!

A blue flash swept between Olivia and me.

-Thunk!

Both Olivia and I could see the flash piercing the chest of the charging Death Knight.

The burning blue magical power surrounding the sword, embedded in the Death Knight's chest, became visible.

And then.

-Swish!

Another blue flash passed us.

This time, it was a person.

-Crash!

Both Olivia and I clearly saw it as one of the Death Knights charged forward, only to be kicked with such force that it was sent flying into a burning building.

In an instant, one Death Knight was incapacitated, and the other was slammed into a corner. The one who did this then turned to us.

"Reinhardt, Miss Olivia."

The head of the Special Investigation Bureau.

And, the captain of the 3rd unit of Shanafel.

"The situation is dire. Return to the empire."

With that, the Swordmaster.

Scottla Kelton gave us a succinct order.

—---

I had thought that he must be quite skilled, having been dispatched to such an important scene and holding the position of bureau chief.

It wasn't so strange that Scottla Kelton was a Swordmaster, being the captain of the 3rd unit of Shanafel, the empire's greatest knight order.

However, Olivia had used an awakened level of divine power, and I had struggled against the two Death Knights. They were sent flying helplessly by a single stroke of his sword and a kick.

It felt more real than ever that the Swordmaster was an unrivaled existence even among superhumans.

But the Death Knights were no pushovers.

Swoosh!

One Death Knight nonchalantly pulled the sword embedded in its chest and threw it away, as if it wouldn't suffer a fatal wound unless it was torn apart by divine power.

The magic within the sword seemed to have already faded.

Crunch!

And the Death Knight that had been slammed into the wall crawled out of the debris, tossing it aside like styrofoam.

"…"

Their twisted limbs.

But even their dark eyes, which seemed to burn with darkness.

These grotesque beings, exuding a sense of dread, stood before Scottla Kelton.

"Death Knights."

I had sensed it to some extent when I saw them riding phantom horses, but Death Knights…

The Death Knights didn't charge at Scottla Kelton.

Instead, they slowly began to retreat. Had they decided that facing the Swordmaster would be too difficult?

Aware of how dire the situation was, they backed away and put some distance between us through several leaps.

Swish!

As they reached into the air, phantom horses were summoned, tethered by reins.

Kiiiiiiii!

The Death Knights summoned their phantom horses, mounted them, and disappeared as they raced through the burning streets at a speed that made pursuit impossible.

Scottla Kelton did not chase after the retreating Death Knights.

"There may be more of them. I will escort you to the gate."

It seemed he prioritized protecting Olivia and me.

"I have sent a messenger to the empire. Soon, the Holy Knights and imperial support troops will arrive. The situation will stabilize, so you need not involve yourselves any further."

“Aaaaaah!”

“Mommyyyyy!”

Hell was all around us.

Too many things were already not okay.

Scottla Kelton told Olivia and me a story that we couldn't possibly believe, saying that everything would be fine.

—---

We couldn't insist on being stubborn when the Swordmaster told us not to interfere in the situation any further.

Not knowing the extent of the power held by the followers of the Demon King, we had directly experienced the strength of a Death Knight, the highest-ranking undead.

We had managed to defeat one, but there were two more, and we had no idea how many more there might be.

"Kieeeeek!"

"I'll take care of this."

As the reanimated corpses appeared and charged at us, Kelton struck them not with the blade of his Aura Blade, but with the flat side of his sword.

"Pwoong!"

As if they had been caught in a massive explosion, the charging undead were struck by the flat side of the sword and exploded like balloons.

It was the technique used by Saviolin Turner when deflecting my and Ellen's swords.

When used with the intent to kill the opponent, the mere impact would cause them to explode in a shockwave.

Once again, I felt how much Saviolin Turner had been holding back against us.

As soon as he sensed something strange, Scottla Kelton seemed to have sent a

messenger to the Empire.

We could see the troops who had arrived to protect the burning city of Rajeurn, now in disarray, beginning to clean up the situation even before we reached the warp gate nearby.

"We came following the light, but did you happen to converse with the Death Knight?"

It seemed as if he intended to gather information from us before returning to the Empire, so he asked us.

"They said… they are underlings of the Demon King. And they seem to refer to the Demon King as the 'prophet'…considering the words they used…"

"It must be the followers of the Demon King. If there are any who would call the Demon King a prophet, it would be them."

"Yes… They said they intend to complete the unfinished work of the prophet… It seems they planned this attack after the last one failed."

"Hmm…?"

Scottla Kelton narrowed his eyes at Olivia's words.

"Did you hear them correctly?"

"Yes? Ah… I'm sure that's what I heard."

He must be incredulous, knowing that the previous Demon King attack was a fabrication.

The Demon King had failed in the attack on Rajeurn, and therefore had sent more powerful minions to destroy Rajeurn once and for all. That was the only way Olivia could understand it.

However, Kelton knew that the Demon King had nothing to do with the previous attack in the first place.

Thus, the very situation where the minions of the Demon King attacked Rajeurn to

complete the failed attack didn't make sense to him.

Of course, he didn't tell us any of this.

He must have had a hunch that something was off about the followers of the Demon King attacking Rajeurn.

"Hmm, and…"

That wasn't all.

He had also seen Olivia holding Tiamata, not just me.

"I think you should discuss the details with the captain."

Not only me, but Shanafel had also learned that Olivia could wield Tiamata.

That meant the royal family would inevitably learn of it.

—---

As we arrived at the warp gate of Rajeurn, countless armed forces were pouring out of the gate. Sending an army was a more dangerous move than intervening in domestic affairs, but the Levaina royal family would have welcomed this deployment from the empire with open arms rather than resisting.

And there, a familiar face was waiting for us.

"I'm glad you're both safe."

Saviolin Turner.

She was guarding the area around the warp gate with the members of the Shanafel squad. It was not a trivial task, as the destruction of the warp gate would have caused severe disruptions in troop deployment, making it a crucial defensive point.

As Turner approached me, she carefully embraced me.

"I'm sorry. I thought it would be safe here."

Her coming here in person, as the leader of the Shanafel, was surely due to Olivia Lanze and me being present.

I could feel the deep sense of apology in her voice.

"For now, return to the temple. We'll take care of everything that happens in Rajeurn."

Hero or warrior.

I had tried to be something similar, and in fact, had done something similar. Though, to be precise, it was Olivia who had done it, not me.

But the scale of the incident had grown too large, and the situation had reached a level that neither I nor Olivia could resolve on our own.

My fingertips trembled slightly.

The intense pressure from the weapon wielded by the Death Knight wouldn't easily fade from memory.

And then, Scottla Kelton whispered something into Saviolin Turner's ear.

Upon hearing it, Turner's eyes widened – specifically, as she looked at Olivia.

“…For now, go back. We'll talk in detail later."

Rajeurn was far too dangerous a place for conversation, not the right setting for sharing stories.

—---

It was the empire's role to put an end to the turmoil in Rajeurn, not ours. No matter how small the country, the empire had to take the situation seriously when the capital was attacked by an unidentified heretical group. They had dispatched the Shanafel, each member capable of special operations, and even their leader.

Of course, my presence in this place played a significant part in their decision.

The scale of the attackers on Rajeurn was unknown, but they were no match for the

Shanafel.

On another note, it was my first time witnessing the prowess of a Swordmaster, and it sent chills down my spine.

While the next stage of Magic Body Strengthening was the Master class, the difference seemed too vast.

I couldn't stand against the Death Knight, and Olivia had used all her strength to handle one, but Scottla Kelton effortlessly fought against two.

Moreover, the Death Knights had even sensed they were outmatched and had fled.

The night of the Imperial Road was tranquil.

Somewhere on the continent, the capital of a small country had turned into a sea of flames, but the Imperial Road seemed unaware of such events, remaining calm and quiet. Except for the troops moving urgently through the gate, it appeared as if nothing had happened.

Crossing just one gate, let alone several, one might not even know that a massacre was taking place somewhere.

It seemed that Olivia, like myself, was not used to the tranquility of the ecliptic.

"Should I ask them to keep it a secret?"

Olivia must have known what I was talking about. If it became known that Olivia had become the owner of Tiamata, more trouble would ensue.

She would be tormented by countless pleas to become our savior as a holy maiden, as well as by coercion and oppression.

For Olivia, who despised such things terribly, it must have been unsettling that Scottla Kelton had seen Tiamata.

I could ask Turner to keep it a secret that Olivia had become Tiamata's owner, and both Turner and the royal family would keep the secret.

In response to my words, Olivia looked up at the night sky.

Stars were embroidered across the sky as if they would pour down. Somewhere, the sky was invisible due to thick smoke and fires covering the ground.

Olivia quietly gazed at the ecliptic sky, where even the Milky Way could be seen.

"You guys decided to let people know that you became the owner of Alsebringer."

“…Yes."

For fame, for political influence. To let people know about the hero's return through that.

To give hope to people, although it was more for Charlotte, such side effects would follow.

"Then, guys like those earlier will target you, right?"

If the hero's return was known, the Demon King would target me. Most people were worried about that, but I was sure it wouldn't happen.

However, today I found out.

There were followers of the Demon King that I didn't even know about. They actually existed, claiming to be his followers, arbitrarily assuming his intentions and putting them into action.

Olivia looked at me and smiled playfully.

"The Demon King will target those who pose a threat to him. If being the owner of Alsbringer puts you in danger."

"The Demon King would also target the owner of Tiamata."

"And, I'm stronger than you."

"The Demon King will try to get rid of me first."

Her words seemed to strangle me.

That sad gaze, her feelings towards me.

It felt like my heart was being wrung.

"I want to protect you. But I almost couldn't."

Two Death Knights.

If Scottla Kelton hadn't appeared at the right moment, the situation could have become dire. Olivia could have died, or I could have.

"If it's difficult to protect you alone, then I must become whatever is necessary. Be it a holy maiden, a hero, a commander of the Holy Knights, or the pope of the Five Great Holy Religions…"

Olivia looks at me.

"Even if it means becoming the first Holy Emperor of the Holy Empire, or anything else."

Olivia decides to pick up the name of the abandoned god.

Not for the god, not for the people.

For me.

"I'll do anything to protect you."

Olivia, who wanted to live a life of her own choosing, ends up choosing to return to the life of coercion from which she had run.

I had chosen to walk a dangerous path for Charlotte.

Olivia intended to walk an even more perilous path than I.

To create a situation where she would be targeted before me, should the Demon King set his sights on us.

Guilt welled up within me.

I had nothing to offer her.

Why must she take on such risks without any expectations of me in return?

Amidst the rising guilt, I realized something.

Was this the emotion Charlotte felt towards me?

No wonder she would always avert her gaze and look down, wearing an apologetic expression whenever she saw me.

In an unexpected place,

I had learned how Charlotte must feel, knowing that Olivia was willing to sacrifice everything for me.

Grateful, but with guilt that outweighed that gratitude.

What am I?

Who am I to deserve this?

Before Olivia's blind devotion, I was consumed by guilt.

As if she knew that, Olivia looked at me and smiled.

"Because it's the life you've given me, I chose to use it for you. No, don't apologize. It's a choice I made for myself."

Olivia decided to become Olivia Lanze once more.

"So, Reinhardt. No matter what happens, even if the world turns upside down, even if the Demon King or the world itself hurts you. Whatever comes our way."

As Olivia grabbed my collar and pulled me close, she pressed her lips to my forehead.

"I will protect you."

She whispered tenderly.

Chapter 403

It had only been two days since I left the temple. And my return was at night, well past bedtime.

Thus, although people knew where I went, no one knew yet that I had encountered the Death Knight in Rajeurn and returned. Of course, given the nature of the incident, it wouldn't be long before rumors spread throughout the empire.

"…"

After parting ways with Olivia, I returned to the second-year dormitory, where I found Ellen sitting dazedly in the lobby.

I had thought this might happen.

Ellen looked at me.

"…"

I could read countless emotions in her eyes. She had been worried about me, wondering when I would return, and now that I was in front of her, she seemed unsure of how to begin.

Instead, she averted her gaze and bowed her head.

My chest felt tight, as if it were constricted.

Would we become strangers like this?

If so, wouldn't that actually be better?

Shouldn't we be glad for this situation, in which we both try to unburden ourselves of the emotions we carry for each other, if only a little?

Yes.

It would be less painful for both of us later on.

Yet, I couldn't find any comfort. Whatever I said would be a lie. We can't have everything, and I had made a choice.

I had chosen Charlotte.

I had to distance myself from Ellen Artorius.

And so, I tried to pass by her.

But then…

She grabbed the hem of my clothes as I attempted to pass.

"…"

"…"

I couldn't ask her to let go.

It wasn't a strong grip, rather a delicate one, as if she didn't even realize it.

Though I didn't know what to say, I couldn't just leave her like this.

With just a slight twist of my arm, she would have let go, but she held on ever so lightly.

Not long ago, she would have held on so tightly that she wouldn't let go.

Our relationship had been shattered by a single word: engagement.

And so, it wasn't even her hand, but the hem of my clothes, held so very lightly.

It seemed as if Ellen thought even this action was wrong.

"You went to a dangerous place," she said quietly, her head still bowed.

"…"

"I can smell… burning."

My clothes must have picked up the scent of burning, having been in the midst of a fiery inferno.

Unable to find the right words, Ellen seemed to have no choice but to guess where I had been and what I had experienced.

She was Ellen, who hated the thought of me being in danger with a passion.

She would hate it, but if I chose to do it, she wouldn't be able to stop me. However, this time it wasn't a dangerous place I went to, but a place that had become dangerous.

I couldn't push Ellen away, and she couldn't pull me closer.

"Will you keep… going to dangerous places like this…?" she asked, her eyes brimming with tears.

She probably knew what I had to do.

"Most likely."

"…"

"Don't worry. I won't go to truly dangerous places, and even if I wanted to, people wouldn't let me."

It was a lie.

Even in less dangerous places, sudden incidents like the one that just occurred could happen. As long as there are followers emerging in places I cannot control, I cannot consider any place I go, or even this imperial capital, to be truly safe.

Ellen's gaze, as she looked at me, made it clear she didn't believe a word I said.

Rumors of the Demon Cultists attacking the holy capital of Levaina, Rajeurn, would soon spread to the imperial capital. The fact that Olivia and I were present would also become known, as well as my encounter with the Death Knight.

Ellen seemed to be about to say something, but in the end, she just lowered her head.

The hand holding my sleeve was eventually let go.

—---

I returned to my room in the dormitory.

I couldn't shake off my tangled thoughts.

Just before I lay down in bed after washing up, there was movement in the air.

Swish -

A white mist gathered in one corner of the room, taking on a human shape.

"So, how did it go?"

"Ah, you."

The silver-haired girl, Lucinil, had appeared.

Could Lucinil, like Sarkegaar, visit without anyone knowing? Lucinil was assigned to protect me, but due to certain limitations, she couldn't accompany me to Rajeurn.

"I heard it wasn't particularly dangerous…”

Whether she received that information from Epinhauser or not, Lucinil didn't seem too worried.

"Your expression says otherwise."

Of course, the reason for my current unpleasant expression was due to my recent encounter with Ellen, rather than what happened in Rajeurn.

"The Demon Cultists attacked Rajeurn."

“…What?"

Upon hearing my words, Lucinil's expression hardened.

As she probably knew the reason for my visit to Rajeurn, I explained only the events that occurred afterward.

The crowds in Rajeurn, driven mad by the terror of the Demon Lord, began persecuting and executing heretics. Then, suddenly, the real Demon Cultists attacked Rajeurn.

I also told her about my encounter with the Death Knight and how the situation seemed to worsen, so we decided to leave Rajeurn for the time being.

The crux of the issue was this:

"It seems the Demon Cultists are following me."

“…What on earth are you talking about?"

Yes. The situation was so bizarre that it was difficult to understand. I couldn't help but be dumbfounded and furious.

"They behaved as if I had ordered the attack on Rajeurn. They even referred to me as some kind of prophet."

“…But you didn't cause the events in Rajeurn in the first place."

"Exactly."

I clicked my tongue in irritation.

"They seem to think that there must have been a reason for me to destroy Rajeurn. So, they attacked Rajeurn as if they were completing the task I had failed to accomplish…”

Since I didn't actually instigate the attack on Rajeurn, the Demon Cultists' actions were just empty gestures. Numerous people were dying, but it had nothing to do with my intentions.

"A city turned to ashes by the misguided loyalty of strangers I don't even know…”

Lucinil sighed, folding her arms.

"You, what are we going to do about this?"

Lucinil had been skeptical about the talk of world peace and all, but the incident with the demonic cult's attack, resulting from Bertus's conspiracy, was cornering her as well.

She had somewhat anticipated that the demonic cult, which should have been destroyed by the return of the Demon King, would be expanding its influence somewhere. But it felt eerily real now that it had come to light.

"First, we need to find the members of the demonic cult and either bring them under our control or eliminate them."

Once I confirmed their loyalty to me, I would either turn them into my true subordinates or, if their beliefs were too dangerous, eliminate them.

The cultists needed to be found.

At my words, Lucinil cocked her head.

"But how are you going to find them?"

"We have to think about that."

They weren't the kind of people to be openly active, so it was hard to think of a way to catch them unless they revealed themselves like they did now.

"I'll share the information with the Council and the Order for now."

"Yes. And let's also get in touch with the royal family. I think they'll know, but we need to make sure they're aware that we're not behind this."

"Right, it's best to make things clear. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Although they would eventually communicate through Sarkegaar, it was a good idea to exchange opinions with the royal family as well.

In this situation, a connection had been created between the revolutionary forces, who tried to form a bond, and the royal family, who were practically their greatest enemy.

The royal family would expect us to become enemies at some point, but they would want to use us as long as they could, just as I was doing now.

Lucinil would take care of delivering my opinion to Sarkegaar.

"I know we couldn't help it this time, but don't get involved in anything too dangerous. It feels like you're hanging me out to dry."

She worried for me as if I were a child. I was grateful for her concern, but it was amusing to imagine Lucinil fretting and biting her nails upon hearing that I went to Rajeurn.

"I might follow you secretly, so don't be too surprised if I suddenly appear."

"That would be great for me. But you know that if someone sees us, both you and I would be kicked out of the Temple, right?"

"I'll take care of that, you little rascal. Anyway, I should head back now…"

"Oh, right."

As Lucinil was about to leave, I remembered one last thing I had to tell her.

"Well… this isn't as important as the demonic cult issue."

"What is it?"

"It seems that a new religion is emerging."

It sounded ridiculous when I tried to say it.

"A new religion? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"A religion that believes in the resurrection of Ragan Artorius is spreading among the people."

"Uh… what?"

Just as I was dumbfounded, Lucinil's reaction was no different. In their terror, some people suspected their neighbors of being heretics, while others, driven mad by fear,

sought out an absurd hope.

Fear produced the same cause, but the results were vastly different.

"Wow… I've seen countless bizarre things humans do, but this is just astonishing…"

It seemed that Lucinil couldn't help but feel dumbfounded by the current situation, where the baseless belief that the already dead hero would resurrect spread due to the absence of a worthy opponent for the Demon King.

"Well, if the true owner of the sacred relic were revealed to the world, such beliefs would probably disappear. It's just that there's no reason to believe it right now…"

In the end, they believed that the hero would be resurrected and the Demon King would be defeated through faith. If it became known that an adversary of the Demon King, rather than the hero, had appeared in the world, wouldn't the faith in the hero naturally disappear?

At my words, Lucinil stared at me intently.

"That… Reinhardt, right? I don't think that's the case, you see?"

"Huh?"

"You said you would propose to the princess and reveal that you are the owner of the Alsebringer, didn't you?"

"Yes."

So what's the big deal?

"And Alsebringer is the sword of Ragan Artorius, right?"

"Well, yeah…"

"Then, wouldn't people believe that you are the reincarnation of Ragan Artorius?"

"What?"

I don't understand what he's saying.

"No, even if Ragan Artorius really reincarnated, he would be less than a year old now. He's been dead for just over a year. It doesn't make sense for people to believe that I am the reincarnation of Ragan Artorius based on the timeline, does it? There's no way they'd think that…"

"Does believing in the resurrection of Ragan Artorius make sense in the first place?"

"Ah."

At that moment, my mind seemed to freeze.

Right.

What's the point of saying that people who believe in something that doesn't make sense won't believe in something even more nonsensical?

When it became known that I was the owner of Alsebringer, it was clear that the followers of the hero's faith would treat me as the reincarnation of Artorius or a prophet simply because I possessed Alsebringer.

"Wow! Our Reinhardt is amazing! A prophet of the Demon Faith and a prophet of the Hero Faith at the same time!"

Lucinil burst out with a malicious laugh and hugged me.

-Whack!

"Y-You bastard…"

"Our baby is the best!"

"Why am I your baby?!"

As I forcefully pushed Lucinil away, she pondered with a sinister smile.

"Wow, no joke, you really have a lot of titles?"

"Rightful heir to Darkland."

"King of all demons."

"Ally of the Vampire Council."

"Collaborator of the Black Order."

"Master of Tiamata and Apostle of Tu'an."

"Owner of Alsebringer and Apostle of Als."

"Prophet of all Demon Faith followers."

"And a prophet of the Hero Faith as well…"

Lucinil smirked.

"And, a son-in-law to the Empire's royal family?"

Even I felt dizzy hearing all that.

"Isn't my existence a contradiction in itself?"

Exactly…

What am I, really?

—---

As Lucinil said, it was only natural that the followers of the Hero Faith would revere and worship me as a prophet once they knew of my existence.

And so, the followers of the demon god proclaimed themselves as the servants of the Demon King.

Prophets of two groups with completely different attributes.

It was decided to leave the task of finding the followers of the demon god to the Council. Since the followers of the demon god would also want to contact the Demon King, capturing them would be a foregone conclusion once contact was made. The problem was that they didn't know in which direction to make contact.

The next day.

Olivia and I received a summons from Saviolin Turner.

"It has been confirmed that the followers of the demon god were responsible for the incident in Rajeurn."

"…"

"As expected…"

"At this point, it is presumed that the powers of the demon god Kier and Talad were used."

Kier, the god of corruption, and Talad, the god of fear.

Had the demon god priests, who were the counterparts of the two gods, been deployed? This would mean that the followers of the demon god were cooperating, just like the five major god religions.

I had thought that those who set the fires were using something akin to magic, but it turned out that they were using divine magic fueled by the divine power of the demon gods.

"What is the current situation?"

At Olivia's question, Turner's expression darkened.

"We were able to handle the resurrecting corpses. We captured some of the demon god followers, but they all committed suicide, and we failed to capture the core members. We are currently tracking them, but we don't know how it will turn out."

Although Saviolin Turner said this, it seemed that she expected the pursuit to fail.

Furthermore, Turner's face was filled with a deep sense of guilt as she relayed this news.

The Shanafel and the royal family would know that the followers of the demon god had no direct contact with the Demon King.

It wouldn't make sense for the followers of the demon god to come and put an end to the Rajeurn incident, which wasn't even an attack by the Demon King in the first

place.

The empire's involvement in the self-made play had drawn attention away from the real issue. There was no way Turner could be pleased when Rajeurn suffered enormous damage because of the self-made play initiated by the empire and the subsequent misunderstanding by the followers of the demon god.

Saviolin Turner must be feeling an immense sense of responsibility right now.

The attack of the demon god followers had happened, and the dead could not be brought back.

It was clear that she believed they must find and exterminate the demon god followers responsible for this incident.

This time, Saviolin Turner looked at Olivia.

It was because Scottla Kelton had clearly seen Olivia holding my unmistakable Tiamata.

"Olivia and I share Tiamata."

The one who answered was not Olivia, but me.

"Sharing…?"

Naturally, she wouldn't know such a concept was possible, so her confusion was understandable.

"Didn't I tell you last time? Tiamata was corrupted, and Olivia purified the sword…"

"Yes, that's right."

I had drawn Tiamata while fighting against Charlotte, who was being eroded by the Demon King's soul. And then, I explained how I acquired Tiamata and told Olivia's story. Olivia had purified the corrupted Tiamata, and I became its owner.

I hadn't mentioned that Olivia and I now shared Tiamata.

"After that, Olivia and I became able to use Tiamata together."

"Such a thing… is possible?"

But even if it seemed impossible, it had happened.

"Yes, I understand why you wanted to keep this a secret. If you want me to keep this matter confidential, I can do so. However, I won't be able to do anything about the rumors spreading due to those who saw the two of you in Rajeurn."

"No."

At Turner's suggestion, Olivia shook her head.

"I plan to return to the order."

Knowing that her fame might be her downfall, Olivia decided to become even more famous.

Saviolin Turner's eyes widened upon hearing Olivia's decision.

Chapter 404

Rumors spread that a second wave of attacks by the Demon King's minions and demon worshippers had occurred in the city of Rajeurn, resulting in a massive number of casualties.

The tale of the demon's curse, which brought the dead back to life to devour the living, and the newly-dead rising to feast on the living, filled the people with terror.

Although the situation in the Empire was not as extreme as the witch hunts in Rajeurn, the people shuddered in fear, realizing just how much havoc the demon worshippers could wreak if they were to draw their swords.

The emergence of the sinister-sounding Death Knights in the very cities where people lived only intensified their fear.

Of course, not only these terrifying stories spread.

Alongside the chaos, rumors emerged of two heroes wielding sacred relics appearing at the scene.

A man with the Alsebringer.

A woman with the Tiamata.

The Apostles of Als and Tu’an were said to have appeared in the desperate city of Rajeurn, slaughtering the reanimated corpses, demon worshippers, and Death Knights.

In truth, it was indeed the work of Reinhardt and Olivia.

However, it was the Empire's support troops and Shanafel who played a decisive role in resolving the situation. The Empire exaggerated Reinhardt and Olivia's achievements even more.

"That's the Alsebringer, the hero's sword!"

"And the Tiamata too…"

"The gods haven't abandoned us!"

As fear spread, so too did hope follow.

The attacks by the remaining demon forces had only sown fear until now, but the appearance of the two champions in Rajeurn had planted a hope in the masses that was stronger than their fear.

Heroes had appeared to fight the Demon King, and there were two of them.

Their true identities were not widely known, but rumors have a way of spreading.

Some knew that the man was Reinhardt, a second-year student of the Temple Royal Class, while the woman was a sixth-year student.

A truth known to few soon becomes a truth known to all.

The two champions had suddenly emerged and were holding onto the hearts of those who were sinking.

That's why many people felt relief rather than fear when they heard the rumors of the Rajeurn attack.

The demon worshippers' assault was no longer a tragedy but a story of hope. After all, it was happening to strangers in an unknown place.

The rumor that the Demon King's challengers had appeared would soon expand to say that the Demon King would be defeated soon.

Those who knew the truth understood that no matter how powerful Reinhardt and Olivia were, they couldn't possibly stand against the Demon King. Of course, even this wasn't the whole truth.

However, whether the hope was real or false wasn't important.

If peace persisted due to false hope, then it wouldn't be much different from real hope.

As if preventing people from falling into chaos with their faith in the impossible idea of the Heroes' Teachings.

Whether or not the challengers to the Demon King could actually defeat him, the people could endure the present by believing that they would.

Several days later.

The Winter Palace.

"…"

Bertus sat in his office, deep in thought.

Though he had the emperor's approval, the attack on Rajeurn had been Bertus's own plan. He was well aware that civilian casualties were inevitable in such situations.

However, he had not anticipated the subsequent fallout.

Especially not in this manner.

The Demon King was bound to be hostile toward the empire's royal family. The collapse of any connection with the revolutionary forces and even being used by them had naturally fueled their anger.

Cultists of the Demon Faith began to appear.

Their goal was to complete the unfinished plan of the Demon King.

However, the attack on Rajeurn was not the work of the Demon King, so claiming to complete his plan was absurd.

If the Demon Faith's cultists were part of the Demon King's forces, they should have known that the Rajeurn incident was not his plan.

Therefore, it was likely that the cultists had no direct contact with the Demon King.

'Is it really unrelated?'

But there was a slim chance.

Out of anger for their previous humiliation, the Demon King could have deliberately orchestrated this incident.

The attack on Rajeurn had been disguised as the Demon King's work, but the actual damage was minimal. Many civilians had been killed, but the focus had been on the numbers.

The death toll was not that high, and the Rajeurn attack had ultimately failed.

The Demon King may have felt cheated and angered by the minimal damage caused by an act disguised as his own.

Perhaps he thought it was laughable that his forces could barely destroy the capital of a small provincial nation.

Thus, he may have initiated such an incident to demonstrate what would happen if they seriously attacked somewhere. People might start to underestimate the Demon King, considering the unimpressive results of the attack that was rumored to be his doing.

Therefore, it wasn't entirely impossible that the cultists were claiming to be acting under the Demon King's orders.

They could easily issue orders to appear at the disguised attack site and turn Rajeurn into a wasteland.

To warn Bertus of the consequences of using their name so recklessly.

The Demon King had spared Owen de Gatmora, but took revenge by destroying Rajeurn.

If this was indeed the Demon King's intention, then Bertus had paid the price.

In that case, the problem became much bigger.

Bertus had estimated that the remnants of the demonic forces were very few in number.

While individually powerful, they were certainly not a majority. That had been his assumption.

'But if the Demon Faith's cultists are also involved… '

The number of cultists was not comparable to the Five Great Holy Faiths.

However, they were led by powerful undead Death Knights and included priests who worshipped the five Demon Gods.

There were high-ranking priests of the powerful Demon Faith who could cast a curse that enveloped the entire capital of a small, albeit significant, nation.

Urban-scale terror.

The existence of the demon world remnants was proof that they could already wage war. To be able to wield the power of the Demon Cult was equivalent to the Demon King acquiring an army.

What if a curse that revives the dead to kill the living is unleashed in the midst of a battlefield? Regardless of actual combat ability, the soldiers, who rely heavily on morale in a full-scale battle, would be shocked and either collapse or flee.

'It doesn't matter if the Demon King's orders are involved or not.'

It's not important.

The Demon Cult itself is already a grave security threat to the empire and must be eradicated.

Bertus didn't feel guilty that this had happened due to his own mistake.

'Rather, it's fortunate. It's better to discover that such scum exists within the empire before it's too late.'

It was a relief to discover the existence of anti-empire, anti-church forces capable of such acts before their power grew even stronger.

In the current continental situation, where rumors spread that the Demon Cult was expanding here and there due to the Demon King's influence, fear caused some people to abandon their beliefs and seek salvation from the Demon King and his minions.

It was a tumor that would have grown larger if left alone, but now it had revealed itself.

This was not a crisis.

This was a rare opportunity, and the exposed Demon Cult's tail must be seized and uprooted entirely.

-Knock knock

-"Your Highness, there is a request for an audience with Owen de Gatmora."

At the sound of the knock that followed, Bertus took a deep breath.

"Tell him to come in."

At Bertus's concise command, the door opened, and an elderly man wearing a hat bowed deeply to Bertus.

"I am here to see His Highness, the Crown Prince."

"Sit down for now."

Although Owen had many reasons to visit him, Bertus felt he had some idea of the purpose of his visit.

Owen de Gatmora, seated on the sofa, looked at Bertus with a serious expression.

"Your Highness, the demon world forces have delivered their opinion."

"Opinion…?"

"They say that this matter is not their doing. Of course, whether this is true or not is uncertain…"

There is no connection between the Demon Cult and the demon world forces.

Although this claim could be false, it was clear that the demon world forces were reluctant to lose their connection with the royal family due to this incident.

If it were true that the Demon King had no connection to the Demon Cult, what would his stance on the Demon Cult be?

"If it's true, they would want to find the Demon Cult and subjugate them, and if it's false, they've already subjugated the Demon Cult."

Although certainty was impossible, the task at hand was simple.

The top priority now was to find and annihilate the Demon Cult before the Demon King could.

If they were even a little late, the Demon King would swallow the Demon Cult's forces, leading to further consequences.

—---

"Tiamata……”

Inside the Holy Knights' commander's office.

The current Holy Knights Commander, Eleion Bolton, was staring wide-eyed at the white-bladed sword before him.

It was none other than Olivia Lanze who had brought it.

Olivia showed the Tiamata with a calm expression and took it back into her hand.

"It's a welcome change of heart, and to have been chosen by Tiamata…”

"Is this enough to qualify for priesthood?"

It wasn't just the priesthood that was the issue; even without Tiamata, Olivia was capable of much more.

Now she had become the owner of the powerful and great symbol called Tiamata. To put it bluntly, she could easily push aside the current Holy Knights' Commander and take his place with plenty of supporters.

Eleion Bolton gazed at Olivia Lanze, her expression resolute.

"May I ask what made you change your mind?"

"…"

It wasn't for the sake of protecting everyone, but rather for the sake of protecting one person.

Since Reinhardt had saved her life, she would use it only for Reinhardt.

But Olivia knew that she couldn't say such a thing.

"I saw the followers of the Demon God."

"It seems the rumor that you were in Rajeurn is true."

"I thought I couldn't stand by and watch as humans disrupted the world, even if humans banded together, it wouldn't be enough."

Olivia gave a universal reason.

She, who had detested being forced to comply with universal standards and had struggled under the pressure to fulfill the duties of a saint, had come full circle back to where she was meant to be.

"Well, as a student, you won't have many responsibilities yet. However, I can give you any position, authority, and mission as an honorary post. Naturally, I can also provide support in terms of manpower for the tasks you want to undertake."

Eleion Bolton asked Olivia, "Do you have any plans in mind?"

Olivia, a saint with a high reputation.

Being the champion of Tu'an, she could have a significant influence just by spreading hope in the five major temples of the Divine Church. She had been sincere and diligent in helping people and saving others.

Eleion Bolton believed that by simply speaking of hope to those in despair, people would find peace of mind.

As if she already had something in mind, Olivia answered immediately upon being

asked the question.

"I want to become an Inquisitor of Heresy."

"…"

Upon hearing those words, Eleion Bolton's expression hardened.

The Saint of Eredian.

He had thought she would devote herself to saving, helping, and protecting others.

But now she had returned and volunteered for a task that involved torturing, killing, and ferreting out heretics.

It wasn't too strange considering she had returned to the church after witnessing the horrific deeds of the Demon Church followers, and now volunteered for a mission to root out heresy.

The Holy Knights' Commander looked at the Tiamata in Olivia's right hand.

Generation after generation, the champions of Tu'an had killed not demons, monsters, or undead, but humans.

Hunting down the followers of the Demon Church had been the task of the champions of Tu'an.

Would Olivia Lanze be unable to escape that fate as well?

The Saint of Eredian, who had seemed incapable of even stepping on an ant, had now decided to become a heretic hunter for some reason.

"Very well."

Eleion Bolton thought that this must be the will of Tu'an.

—---

Rumors spread like wildfire. Especially when the royal court was intentionally spreading the rumor, the speed at which it spread could only be faster.

The attack on Rajeurn by the Demon Cult.

The appearance of the champions of Tu’an and Als at the scene.

Even their names.

It spread like wildfire in an instant. It wouldn't have been like this under normal circumstances, but with the mention of the Demon King on the continent, the names of the opposing heroes were bound to spread like wildfire as well.

The Royal Class had known about this from the start, but what was important was the reaction outside the Royal Class.

“That person is…”

“The Champion of Als…”

Though Reinhardt and Ellen were taking classes from Saviolin Turner, they were also attending regular classes, of course.

With the name Reinhardt on the attendance roster, they couldn't help but attract the gazes of countless people.

The gazes of the regular class students attending the same class changed completely, and even the teachers looked at them with eyes filled with awe, regardless of gender.

This was not only during classes.

"…”

"Hey, you… You're quite popular…”

Liana muttered blankly as she walked down the street with Reinhardt.

They were not out for a stroll, but simply on their way back to the dormitory after their psychic class had ended.

-Buzzing

As they walked, a large number of students were following and murmuring behind

them.

“They must be dating.”

“Even heroes need romance.”

“They could just be friends.”

“Is that so?”

“No, didn't that person date Miss Temple last year? I saw it.”

“Really?”

"…”

With a crowd following them like some idol with a fan club, Reinhardt couldn't help but feel…

An incredibly dog-like feeling in real-time.

Liana seemed to be dumbfounded by all the attention in real-time as well.

Why on earth are they following?

Why?

Nothing comes from following!

“Hero! Please look over here!”

Being called a hero.

When he actually heard it, it sent chills down his spine.

"Hey, you bastards! Go home, wipe your feet, and sleep! Why are you following and making a fuss?! Huh?!"

In the end, he exploded.

The rumor of the hero with a bad temper would be added to the list.

Liana declared that she couldn't hang out with him anymore when they returned to the dormitory.

—---

It was a terrible feeling when people casually called me a hero. I never thought I'd take mental damage like this.

The expectations people had for me turned into interest, and they started to hover around me, which was really hard to endure. Some even became hardcore fans, following me around regardless of whether it had anything to do with classes.

And even.

"Let's have a match with the power of Alssbringer on the line."

Crazy people who came asking for a match, with baseless confidence, emerged as well.

"I'll test whether you're worthy of being the master of Alssbringer."

It was unclear whether they craved attention or were just overly confident.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

-Whack!

"Ugh!"

"If you're that desperate for attention, go take a dump in the fountain on Main Street, you crazy bastard. You'll get all the attention you can eat for a lifetime."

-Slap!

"Argh!"

It seemed that there were those who wanted to try something because I didn't appear as formidable as they had imagined.

“Kyaa! So cool!”

“…I want to die."

Being a hero.

In a different sense, I felt in real-time that having a strong mentality was essential for this occupation.

Chapter 405

There were many who followed me around, but there were also countless who picked unnecessary fights with me.

Most of them thought that if they could best me, the famous upcoming hero, they might be able to steal even a tiny bit of the popularity I possessed.

Others seemed to be jealous because the women they liked followed me around.

Having a fan club and constantly dealing with people picking fights had become a part of my daily life. Ellen and Harriet were still carefully keeping their distance.

Harriet seemed to be crying alone.

She always wore her hat low, covering her swollen eyes.

Ellen knew that I had been to dangerous places and would continue to do so.

Neither could she stop me, nor was it easy for her to watch, so Harriet seemed to be struggling.

Olivia frequently left the dormitory.

She said she had taken on the duties of an Inquisitor for the Holy Knights. Considering that she was past the age to graduate, and her external activities would already grant her class recognition, the Royal Class dormitory had become nothing more than a place for her to sleep.

Ellen and Harriet were both sinking into depression, while Olivia tried to attract the Demon King's attention by becoming even more famous than me. None of this could possibly make me feel better.

Stress everywhere.

And.

When stress accumulates severely.

Hair falls out.

"Ah… Damn it…”

After taking a shower before bed, I couldn't help but be horrified when I saw the clump of blonde hair on my hand.

I pulled at my hair and saw that circular hair loss had appeared.

In common terms, a bald patch.

It was flaunting its existence, no bigger than a coin.

I didn't want to be reunited with something like this.

Why are you reappearing in my life?

Didn't we agree to part ways forever?

"Hu, huu… huu…”

I focused my mind. Hair began to fill the bald patch in real-time.

The Ring of Hair Loss Permanent Immunity.

Sarkegaar's ring saved my life.

I am a god!

The god of hair loss!

No, if I were the god of hair loss, I'd be losing hair, so should I call myself the god of hair?

I am a god!

The ruler of hair! The god of hair!

Let it fall out as much as it wants! I will replenish it!

I nearly suffered from PTSD for a moment, but Sarkegaar's ring saved me.

It's unfair to be stressed and lose hair, not just twice but exponentially depressing. It's not addition or multiplication; it's exponentiation.

If it weren't for this ring.

I might not have been able to enter the temple in the first place.

Without the ability to restore my hair, would I not have been the first bald hero in history?

Thank you, Sarkegaar.

You are a loyal servant.

Tap tap tap

And just as I thought that, a sparrow began tapping on the window of my room with its beak as I returned.

Click!

As I opened the window, the sparrow swiftly flew into the room, and as I drew the curtains, Sarkegaar transformed into his usual, elegant maid appearance.

"Your Highness, I have come to see you…"

"I love you."

Wham!

"????"

As I suddenly embraced him, Sarkegaar seemed taken aback and flinched.

"You're the loyal servant of the century! You'll go down in history as a great and loyal servant!"

Thank you for saving my hair!

There's no way any other loyal servant in the world has ever solved their lord's baldness problem!

"Y-yes…? Yes! I love you too, Your Highness!"

Not understanding the reason, Sarkegaar embraced me back and patted my back diligently.

—---

Sarkegaar had come with his own mission, but he must have been curious about my sudden behavior, so I explained the reason to him.

“…You mean your hair was falling out?"

“…Yes."

While I considered hair loss a major issue, Sarkegaar, who could freely transform, tilted his head, not understanding my concern.

"It is an immense honor that the ring of the elves has solved Your Highness's problem."

"No, I'm the one who's honored."

Seeing my almost prayerful attitude, Sarkegaar seemed even more puzzled.

"I came here to discuss the information from my contact with Owen de Gatmora, as instructed earlier…”

"Ah, right. That."

Sarkegaar began to share his main purpose with a slightly hesitant expression.

"The royal family seems to have accepted our words for now, but there is still a possibility they do not trust us."

“…That's to be expected."

The royal family may think that the previous attack on Rajeurn was a retaliatory strike. Even if we have a clandestine conversation like this, we're still enemies. That's inevitable.

"We must find the followers of the Demon cult before the Empire does."

"We must."

The race has begun.

If we find the Demon followers later than the imperial royal family, they will be annihilated.

If I find them first, I can have them under my control.

Although I'll have to consider whether it's really necessary to keep them under my feet, there's no need to let the Demon followers run wild like this.

If I can use them later, I will. But for now, I need to make contact with the Demon followers to prevent any unnecessary chaos.

"Based on the information I've gathered, the Empire seems to believe that the Demon religion's base is in the southern part of the continent."

Sarkegaar said cautiously, as if he had conducted his own investigation. As an imperial noble, Sarkegaar had access to the royal family's information.

Of course, the same was true for me.

The southern part of the continent.

Considering the scale of the continent, the term "south" encompasses a vast number of countries and territories, too many to count.

The south.

"If it's the south, then Lord Gallarush might know something."

I had heard that Gallarush was based in a place called the Gelkorgis Desert in the southern part of the continent.

Though the sheer size of the area meant that the chances of obtaining useful information were slim, focusing on Gallarush seemed like the best course of action under the current circumstances.

"Leave the matter of conveying our opinions to the Council to Lucinil, and you may go."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Once again, I watch the figure of Sarkegaar, who has transformed into a sparrow, fly out the window.

Will the Empire strike first, or will we?

Sarkegaar can access the royal family's information, but I am even better in that aspect.

I am a hero.

I can obtain the information collected by the Empire through countless routes, faster than Sarkegaar.

If we get our hands on the followers of the Demon cult, will we dispose of them or use them?

I should have thought about that as well.

—---

Since the day the engagement was mentioned, Ellen no longer ate with Reinhardt at the midnight dining hall.

They didn't have a big fight.

They didn't even have a serious talk about ending their relationship.

However, after hearing those words, it felt as if they couldn't do anything together anymore. Except for the swordsmanship lessons with Turner, Ellen and Reinhardt just passed by each other when they met.

But his expression was unbearable to Ellen.

If Reinhardt's expression when he saw her was one of satisfaction, as if he cherished Charlotte, protected her through the engagement, and would eventually marry her, she might have been able to look away.

But the guilt-ridden gaze that swept over her every time they met tormented Ellen.

She should have thought it was all over.

But because of that gaze, she couldn't think it was over. Their behavior towards each other wasn't as if they didn't exist, but Ellen felt exhausted by the feeling that they had become worse than strangers.

So, Ellen sat blankly in the dining hall.

Not eating anything or doing anything.

She hadn't felt hungry for quite some time. Usually, at this time, she'd be starving and would have to eat something.

While sitting blankly in the dining hall, waiting for someone who wouldn't come, day after day.

Ellen didn't drink a drop of water.

She knew Reinhardt wouldn't come, but she couldn't sleep either.

If she stayed outside, she might catch a glimpse of Reinhardt passing by, but if she stayed in her room, there was no chance at all.

Ellen spent more and more time sitting blankly in the lobby, the dining hall, and the training ground.

If they happened to meet, she wanted to say something.

That it's all okay.

That she understands everything.

That she wants to go back to how they used to be.

That she won't demand him to be hers alone.

To talk like always, exchange swords, and occasionally eat together.

She could be satisfied with that. Even if he was engaged to Charlotte, and they eventually married, couldn't they still do that?

Couldn't they be friends like that?

But trying to be with Reinhardt under that pretext already meant they couldn't be just friends.

If she said something, she felt like she would repeat the same mistake she had made with her brother.

Accusing him of lying when he said he liked her.

Asking if he could so easily let go of her after all those lies.

"Are you just toying with me? Why would you do this to me?"

If, after saying such words, Reinhardt were to die…

Afraid that a situation might come where she couldn't take back the words she'd blurted out, Ellen couldn't say anything to Reinhardt, in case she hurt him and couldn't undo it.

So, Ellen wanted to speak to him but held herself back; she wanted to grab him and talk, but she couldn't.

Just as Reinhardt seemed about to say something but ultimately couldn't, Ellen was the same.

It was already known that Reinhardt was the owner of Alsebringer. The news had spread throughout the temple, causing the Royal Class dormitory to be crowded with regular class students trying to catch a glimpse of Reinhardt.

Ellen knew that this fame would eventually become a knife to stab Reinhardt.

She wanted to do something, but she couldn't do anything.

She couldn't interfere in Charlotte and Reinhardt's problems. She wanted to help Reinhardt, who plunged into dangerous situations, but knowing he wouldn't want that, she couldn't even offer to accompany him.

So, Ellen just sat there, blankly.

Not knowing what to do or how to do it, she just hoped to run into him.

Knowing that Reinhardt wouldn't leave his room since it was past bedtime, she just sat in the lobby and the dining room, blankly.

Reinhardt didn't come to the dining room.

In the midst of a miserable feeling of self-defeat, Ellen thought.

All she could do was think.

It was all happening because of that one thing: Charlotte's life was in danger.

The engagement, Reinhardt's danger, everything.

He tried to secure Charlotte's safety at the cost of his own danger.

It was known that Reinhardt was the owner of Alsebringer, but the engagement had not yet been made public.

If Reinhardt made a desperate choice, and if Charlotte was safe, wouldn't their engagement be canceled?

If that happened…

Could she be by Reinhardt's side again?

"…"

What should she do then?

On that unforgettable night in Kamsencha, Ellen and Harriet heard Reinhardt's

explanation.

Although they didn't know the exact reason, Charlotte had lost the succession competition. That's why her life was in danger, and only a marriage with someone as powerful as Reinhardt could guarantee her safety.

What should she do to keep Charlotte safe?

Could she do it?

Ellen looked out the window of the dining room, pondering.

She thought quietly about her own name.

Ellen.

Ellen, Artorius.

"…"

Ellen stood up from her seat.

—---

Knock, knock.

Late at night.

Hearing the sound of knocking on her door, Charlotte got up from her bed, wearing her nightgown. Sometimes, Turner would come to check on her at night, worried.

"Lady Turner, you must be tired, please get some sleep…"

Thump.

Thus, without any suspicion, when Charlotte opened the door, she couldn't help but gasp at the completely unexpected figure before her.

"Ah…"

Ellen Artorius had come to visit Charlotte in the middle of the night.

"Can we… talk?"

At Ellen's cautious words, Charlotte quietly met her gaze.

Unable to refuse the desperation within those eyes, Charlotte acquiesced.

—---

Long past bedtime, Charlotte, wearing her nightgown with a single coat draped over it, and Ellen, dressed in training clothes, sat facing each other on the terrace.

Charlotte felt guilty towards Reinhardt.

And she also had a similar feeling towards Ellen, albeit not as strong as the one she felt for Reinhardt.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"…”

Ellen silently looked down at the table.

She didn't want Reinhardt to be in danger.

Like Olivia had shouldered some of the genuine danger for Reinhardt, Ellen also wanted to do the same.

The world would focus more on Ragan Artorius's younger sister than on Reinhardt and Olivia. That was the burden of danger.

Ellen was prepared for it, no matter what.

But the method.

She thought that if she could somehow dissolve Reinhardt's inevitable engagement through her actions, it would be wonderful.

Charlotte de Gardias was losing her footing.

Hence, all they needed to do was secure Charlotte's position properly.

Ellen slowly opened her mouth.

"I'll become your knight."

"What? What did you say?"

Unable to comprehend the unexpected statement, Charlotte was at a loss for words.

"If I become your knight, you'll be safe just by that alone."

Ellen Artorius.

Knowing the weight that name carried, Charlotte couldn't help but be taken aback.

Ellen didn't say anything more.

Instead of becoming the bride of Als's champion, Reinhardt, the younger sister of Ragan Artorius, Ellen Artorius, would serve her as her lord.

It was obvious that she would ask for the engagement to be nullified in return, without needing to hear the rest.

Ellen bowed her head to Charlotte.

"For you, I'll do a lot. Anything for the empire. I'll do it all. Use me for whatever you want, and my achievements will become yours…"

Ellen pleaded with a tearful voice.

"I won't say that I'm not doing this because I hate the idea of you and Reinhardt getting engaged. But, Reinhardt will be in greater danger. Instead, let me be the one in danger. I'll do everything. If there's something that Reinhardt must do, I'll do it instead…"

"…"

The hero's sister begged the princess not to take the one thing she couldn't afford to give up, offering everything she had.

Charlotte quietly watched Ellen Artorius, who had come to such a decision because she didn't want to lose Reinhardt.

Last year.

Charlotte had pitied the relationship between Harriet de Saint Owan and Ellen Artorius.

As she thought that their relationship would be destroyed by a single word, she had ultimately remained silent.

But now.

Charlotte found herself in the same position.

She was the one taking away, but she wasn't happy about it at all.

But now.

Seeing Ellen make such a choice because she didn't want to be taken away, Charlotte didn't find it pleasant either.

If she were to refuse.

If they were in equal circumstances.

Knowing who Reinhardt would choose.

Charlotte wasn't just uncomfortable with the current situation, she also didn't enjoy facing Ellen's desperate expression.

"If I refuse, what will you do?"

"…"

Becoming a knight was Ellen's desire, and whether to accept it or not was Charlotte's choice.

If she gritted her teeth and refused, Reinhardt would become engaged to her.

If she turned away from those desperate eyes.

"Please… Please…”

If she ignored those tears.

"I beg… of you…”

Perhaps she could hope for a greater future.

But Charlotte knew.

She had been defeated by Bertus.

Once it was known that the Demon King's soul resided within her, whether the hero's younger sister was her knight or she married the hero as a princess, it would become insignificant.

She would only be relying on Bertus's mercy.

She would always be a burden to Reinhardt.

The relationship between a knight and a lord was better than that of a married couple.

"Alright, become my knight."

She smiled at Ellen.

"But only."

Looking at Ellen, Charlotte smiled.

"This concession is the first and last."

Not satisfied with a cowardly victory, she sought to truly win.

This wasn't giving up.

They canceled the unfair race and decided to stand at the starting line together this

time.

A knight with no intention of loyalty to her lord.

A lord jealous of her own knight.

A strange oath of loyalty had just begun.

Chapter 406

Three days later.

I stood in the central palace of Tetra in the Imperial Palace of Emperatos, observing a certain ceremony.

O great and devout ruler of the swirling mist, one of the five guardians of the universe, and the overseer of the void, the Moon's traveler. The Apostle of Mencis, the savior of mankind, the hero who vanquished the Demon King Valier, the descendant of Ragan Artorius…

The Pope of the Mencis Order recited these words endlessly in the enormous virtual reality, facing the kneeling girl.

Charlotte de Gardias, dressed in a gown and cape, stood before her.

I watched from amongst the officials as Ellen Artorius, wearing a red cloak and kneeling in full armor, took part in the ceremony.

I hadn't expected it to turn out like this.

Our engagement was never announced, so it was as if it never happened.

Instead of becoming Charlotte's fiance, Ellen became the royal knight who served her.

In doing so, Charlotte's safety was ensured.

Like Ellen, I too had been invited to this ceremony and received attention as the new master of Alsebringer.

But naturally, Ellen drew even more attention than I did.

It couldn't be helped.

The top-secret existence of Ragan Artorius's younger sister, now revealed as a royal

guardian knight.

Many of the high-ranking officials present looked at Ellen with a mix of awe and curiosity.

Among those observing the ceremony were the Emperor and Bertus de Gardias.

Bertus and I locked eyes for a moment.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

Was it his way of saying he didn't expect things to turn out like this?

But Bertus did not seem displeased.

One way or another, I was on the side of the imperial family without marrying Charlotte.

And now Ellen Artorius was added to the mix.

From the perspective of someone who would become the master of the royal family, this situation couldn't be bad. With a hidden card that could bring down Charlotte at any time, there was no possibility of her becoming a dangerous rival in the future.

The situation ultimately guaranteed Charlotte's safety, and Bertus secured the support of the two heroes for the empire.

It's one thing for a hero to be part of the empire, but it's entirely another for them to protect the royal family.

The massive support of the people would be added to the royal family, and the already powerful empire would obtain unrivaled legitimacy.

The hero is the protector of mankind, and Ragan Artorius killed the Demon King to protect humanity.

And now, the hero's sister protects the empire.

It's as if the empire represents humanity, giving them unparalleled legitimacy.

Opposing the empire equates to opposing humanity.

The empire becomes the embodiment of morality, and the emperor's words are not only law but also moral principles.

The imperial authority, which had been strengthened after the victory in the Great Demon War, had wavered slightly due to several attacks by the Demon King.

However, the terror of the Demon King had united humanity, and the symbol of the empire, representing the united will of the people, became stronger with the support of the hero.

The empire needed the Demon King.

And so, Bertus needed the Demon King.

The Pope of the Mencis Order read through the entire document, and Charlotte, wielding a silver-shining sword, tapped each of Ellen's shoulders, raising and lowering the sword in repetition.

Ellen became Charlotte's knight.

However, the important matter was the Demon Cult.

They had to find them quickly.

For they might try to kill Olivia and Ellen, claiming to eliminate the threat to the Demon King.

-Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap

In the emperor's hall, following the ceremony of the Royal Guardianship, applause echoed throughout.

With this.

I don't have to be engaged to Charlotte.

However.

Because of this, the empire revealed three significant secrets to the world.

The Champion of Als, Reinhardt.

The Champion of Tu’an, Olivia Lanze.

And the sister of the hero and Apostle of Mencis, Ellen Artorius.

Their names would shake the entire continent.

—---

Naturally, the academy was in an uproar.

After the owner of Alsebringer, the fact that the sister of humanity's savior, Ragan Artorius, was enrolled among the second-year Royal Class students spread throughout the academy.

Moreover.

“Last year's Miss Temple winner, right? She's Artorius's sister!”

“Really?!”

“Somehow… she didn't seem like an ordinary person.”

“Exactly.”

Due to her Miss Temple win, Ellen inevitably became an idol, even more so than Reinhardt.

“A guardian knight for the princess?”

“Both of them are in the same Royal Class, second year.”

“Isn't there another one in the second year? Lord Reinhardt!”

“Yeah, yeah. That's right.”

Not only was the entire academy in chaos, but so was the internal structure of the

Royal Class.

Upon hearing that Ellen chose Charlotte as her liege, Harriet's face turned pale.

"Still… is that possible?"

Before such an event unfolded, it was unimaginable, but after hearing about the guardianship ceremony, Harriet seemed to understand why Ellen made such a decision.

"There's no such thing as impossible."

"Ellen… it's going to get dangerous… definitely…"

Reinhardt's matters are important to Harriet, but so are Ellen's.

Knowing that this could put Ellen in danger, Harriet choked back tears as she held Ellen's hand.

Ellen held Harriet's hand and nodded with a determined expression.

"It'll be alright."

Ellen looked at Harriet.

"The Empire will protect me, and I have Reinhardt, Liana, Adelia, and…"

Ellen looked at Harriet with eyes full of trust.

"You, too."

In Ellen's gaze, which believed that everyone would protect her, there was not a shred of doubt.

"…Yes, Ellen."

Harriet gently hugged Ellen, and Ellen hugged her back.

Harriet already knew, but the reactions of the other classmates were bound to be shock and disbelief.

"It was too big a secret to complain about it being kept secret."

"That's right…"

Liana and Adelia said as they looked at Ellen.

"I'm still sorry. I could have told you."

"It's okay. It's a good thing for the Hero to have a younger sister, especially one as pretty and amazing as you."

Although surprised, Liana didn't seem hurt, and even seemed rather happy. Adelia appeared flustered, as the already slightly intimidating Ellen now felt even more significant.

"What, you're that… Artorius's… sister?"

"Yes."

Olivia, who occasionally visited the temple, was also taken aback upon hearing Ellen's true identity.

"…I guess I believed you because you were so brazen."

"What?"

Olivia glared at Ellen, clicked her tongue, and then…

-Wham!

"!"

"Even so, this cheeky junior of mine is just too adorable this time."

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Buried in Olivia's embrace, Ellen struggled but couldn't free herself from her grip.

Ellen played a crucial role in canceling Reinhardt's engagement, and she couldn't have not known that.

“…What are you doing?"

Ellen, finally freed after a while, caught her breath with a flushed face. Olivia tried to poke Ellen's cheek, but Ellen dodged her gesture just by moving her head.

"They say the money goes to whoever catches it. Heh."

Though Ellen declared her guardianship, Reinhardt acted as if it was his own, and Olivia laughed and waved her hand.

"I'm busy, so I'll go now! Think about what you want to eat! I'll treat you to a meal!"

"No, thank you."

"Yeah, get lost."

Whether Olivia truly had urgent matters or not, she quickly left the temple. Ellen quietly watched her retreating figure.

Ellen had only heard that Olivia worked as an Inquisitor but didn't know the specifics of her job.

However, Ellen thought the shadow that seemed to loom over Olivia's figure appeared unusually dark.

The reactions of the entire Royal Class had changed significantly.

It became known that the calm and exceptionally talented second year student was in fact the master of Lament and the younger sibling of Artorius. Naturally, the freshman students were astonished to find that they had not one, but two seniors in the second year who were practically untouchable in terms of skill. They sent looks of near reverence.

Of course.

Something very important had changed as well.

Having received the title of a Guardian Knight, Ellen was a knight, even though she was still a student. Moreover, she had become a high-ranking knight with considerable authority and power, as a Guardian Knight of the Royal Family.

Of course, Ellen had no interest in such things.

What was important was the relationship between Ellen and Charlotte.

Ellen and Charlotte hadn't been particularly close to begin with. They had the connection of Reinhardt, but neither were they close nor on bad terms.

However, both of them were half-willingly, half-forced into the relationship of a Guardian Knight and a Lord, which led to a reestablishment of their relationship.

So, whether they liked it or not, they had become a superior-subordinate relationship.

"Ellen."

"Yeah?"

"Shouldn't you call me my Lord?"

"We're in the Temple."

In the Temple, where status is meaningless, Ellen's words that the relationship between a lord and a knight is also meaningless were, in some cases, quite reasonable.

But Charlotte looked at Ellen with narrowed eyes.

"Will you call me Lord after graduation?"

"We'll see."

Charlotte stared at Ellen, who answered nonchalantly.

"…"

"…"

Ellen had no loyalty towards Charlotte whatsoever.

If left alone, Reinhardt would go beyond engagement to marriage, and she had even

risked her life, revealing her identity and becoming a knight to gain greater fame to become a target instead.

Charlotte was no different.

She had no personal trust in Ellen, and she had accepted Ellen's request out of guilt for imposing too much sacrifice on Reinhardt.

So, from afar, it seemed like the descendants of heroes supporting the empire had a huge influence, but in reality, their relationship had become worse than that of strangers.

To Ellen, Charlotte was someone who almost took Reinhardt away.

To Charlotte, Ellen was the person Reinhardt devoted most of his attention to.

Thus.

Neither of them could like each other after overcoming certain situations.

"Do you know that I've made a lot of concessions? Can't you be a little grateful?"

"I am grateful. That's why I became your knight."

Both Charlotte and Ellen had made some concessions.

Charlotte, who could have had Reinhardt if she kept quiet, and Ellen, who had risked attracting the attention of demonic forces by revealing her identity as the hero's younger sister and supported the empire, had both made concessions.

Charlotte had given up her future, and Ellen had decided to protect the empire even at the risk of her life being threatened.

Therefore, strictly speaking, they had not so much incurred debt to each other as exchanged it.

Moreover, while Ellen had no loyalty, she had a sense of responsibility.

As she had vowed, even if Ellen had no loyalty to Charlotte, she would risk her life to protect Charlotte if she were in danger. She had no intention of forsaking her duties

as a Guardian Knight.

Ellen and Charlotte stared at each other intently.

Somehow, the two had become oddly entangled.

The situation had come to this, and they decided to have a proper showdown.

So, Charlotte was a bit annoyed with Ellen.

The feeling was mutual for Ellen.

"Honestly, you know you're quite unpleasant, right?"

"You, who made it this far with just pity, are rather cowardly."

"Wow… that's harsh. Seriously, that's really harsh, you know!"

"I just wanted to show you what being truly unpleasant is like since you mentioned it. No hard feelings."

"What kind of guardian knight is like this…"

"Find another one, excluding Reinhardt."

"Ever since you got close to Reinhardt, your speech has become so annoying!"

"Well, you don't seem to have gotten close enough to imitate his speech. Such a shame."

"Wh-what? Seriously, this is… this is really…"

Bound together by the oath of being guardian knights, Charlotte and Ellen had come to really dislike each other.

"But still, I'm truly grateful."

Ellen grumbled before adding that.

"So, even if the whole world abandons you, I'll protect you."

In her own way, she pledged her loyalty to her lord.

“…You leave me speechless."

Charlotte, her face slightly flushed, turned away from Ellen as she said this.

Ellen became Charlotte's knight.

Their engagement was as if it never happened. They had discussed the matter separately with the emperor.

The emperor still wanted to honor the engagement and even the marriage, if Reinhardt wished. It seemed he would even prefer it.

However, they withdrew from the idea, thinking there was no need to go that far since the situation had come to this.

It was an absurd situation. The power to choose lay in my hands in such circumstances.

The engagement was as if it never happened, but this choice brought about a significant change, revealing Ellen, Charlotte, and Olivia to the world.

And yet, Ellen and Reinhardt hadn't properly discussed the issue. Unlike last time, Reinhardt didn't know what to say to Ellen, and Ellen seemed unsure of how to begin their conversation.

So after the sword lesson guided by Saviolin Turner ended and Tana left, Ellen and Reindhardt sat side by side on the waiting room bench, not saying a word.

Feeling that they should talk, neither of them left.

However, neither knew what to say to start the conversation.

Words of gratitude and apologies both felt strange.

Reinhardt had made her choice, and it was Charlotte.

Ellen had sacrificed herself to blur that choice.

So, wasn't it strange to say thank you?

And wasn't it strange to say sorry?

"…"

"…"

Thus, even days after Ellen became a knight, she and Reinhardt hadn't exchanged any words. Ellen had chosen Charlotte, but he couldn't even have a conversation with her.

How much time had passed?

We couldn't speak a word until darkness fell outside the window, overlooking the waiting room.

I had to say something, so I finally opened my mouth.

"I am…"

"Just promise me one thing."

But before I could even speak, Ellen cut me off. She looked at me.

"Like last time… like before… just like that time…"

Tears welled up in Ellen's eyes as she tried to speak.

"Don't… lie like that… again."

She must be referring to the incident on Kamsencha Island.

She asked if it was a lie, and I said it was.

Ellen sobbed.

"I knew it was a lie… but knowing it was a lie… of course, I knew…"

"It hurt… too much."

Ellen pleaded with me through her tears.

I had intended to sacrifice something, but Ellen had sacrificed herself in my place.

But in the end, I also faced some risks by revealing my identity to the world.

Before I could sacrifice more to protect Charlotte, Ellen intercepted it.

Both of us had shouldered a burden to protect Charlotte.

Ellen only had one request for me.

Not to choose her, nor to like her.

Just like before.

Just don't destroy yourself with lies, that's all she asks.

I couldn't say I liked her.

I couldn't even say thank you.

Though it may not be something that can be resolved with an apology.

"I'm sorry."

That was all I could say.

—---

On the way back to the dormitory at night.

Ellen and I walked together, slightly apart from each other. A strange relationship had formed between us, entangled with guilt and obsession.

Even though the engagement had been canceled and Ellen had spoken about it, it was difficult for me to say anything.

Could we go back to the way things were?

Could we go back and live as if nothing had happened?

Do I even deserve that?

I felt like I couldn't do anything because whatever action I took seemed wrong.

We walked in silence back to the second-year dormitory.

As it was night and I intended to go inside and rest, Ellen grabbed my collar. Looking at me with her usual calm expression, she said,

"I'm hungry."

It was a casual remark.

It meant nothing.

Ellen always made such remarks nonchalantly, and after saying them, I Qwould cook something to eat.

A casual remark.

Soon.

An everyday phrase.

Now that the strange moments had passed, let's return to our daily lives.

Let's go back to those days when we would diligently clash our swords, get bruised and battered, eat a lot before bed, and fall asleep.

Her simple words were both forgiveness and a signal.

Let's live like we used to.

Together, let's share these seemingly insignificant moments.

The guilt hasn't disappeared, and something that has changed can't simply return to

the way it was before.

However.

As if nothing has changed, as if there is no guilt.

We can pretend.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Stew. With beef."

"Alright. Let's eat."

"Make a lot."

“…Just how much are you planning to eat?"

How much indeed.

Ellen seemed delighted that I asked her like that.

"Loads and loads."

She said with a bright smile.

Chapter 407

At the Imperial Palace of Emperatos, the Winter Palace.

"How does it feel to have the support of two heroes?"

"I'm starting to feel a bit uplifted, but I don't really want to react to it."

Charlotte responded curtly to Bertus's question.

"What would have happened if Ellen Artorius had become your guardian knight, and you couldn't resist and even got engaged to Reinhardt with your eyes closed? Isn't that an unpredictable outcome?"

Charlotte furrowed her brow at Bertus's maliciously sarcastic remark.

"Do you really think I'd want to go down in history as a princess who was killed by her own knight?"

Surprisingly, Bertus was taken aback by Charlotte's nonchalant response.

"Do you really think Ellen would do that?"

"Even if she doesn't, Reinhardt would still feel humiliated by me, for sure. And that's what I hate more."

Bertus couldn't help but be dumbfounded by Charlotte's candid admission that she'd rather die at the hands of a jealous Ellen than earn Reinhardt's hatred.

She was not someone who would reveal her feelings so excessively.

But after accepting defeat, Charlotte had become brutally honest in many ways.

"So, what's the reason for inviting your half-siblings, whom you don't particularly like, to your palace when you're not busy and have nothing to do?"

The current visit had come about because Bertus had told Charlotte to stop by the

Winter Palace.

Charlotte had no choice but to come, as Bertus had requested.

Her support base was now secure, but as long as Bertus knew that Charlotte's soul had fused with the Demon King's soul, her life was always in danger.

"Well, do you have any progress in your research on the Soul Binding spell?"

Charlotte's expression hardened at the question.

"You're asking even though you know, aren't you?"

“…I know you think very little of me, but this time I really don't know. All I know is that you've obtained a grimoire about the Soul Binding spell from somewhere and that you're planning to try something with it."

Charlotte couldn't understand Bertus's claim of ignorance. Though she had tried to keep it a secret, Bertus had always seemed to have all the information at his fingertips.

If Bertus still didn't know about the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's castle, that would be even more surprising.

Bertus didn't know what he should have known.

That meant the information had been blocked somewhere.

'Could it be Turner?'

Turner was supposed to remain neutral, but at some point, she had begun to support Charlotte, knowingly or unknowingly.

Saviolin Turner could be Charlotte's last hope, trying to prevent information about the Soul Binding spell from reaching Bertus's ears.

As a result, Bertus had learned about the Soul Binding spell, but he clearly didn't know that its source was the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's castle.

Of course, Bertus might know about the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's

castle.

However, if they could somehow hide the information that Charlotte, Turner, and Reinhardt had headed to the Demon King's castle, there would be no connection between the grimoire on the Soul Binding spell and the information about the underground labyrinth.

Bertus probably knew of the soul-binding magic and the underground labyrinth as separate pieces of information.

If the information had been properly blocked, only three people would know about the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's domain.

Saviolin Turner, Charlotte herself, and Reinhardt.

Even the wizards who conducted the soul-binding magic research didn't know where they had obtained the grimoires. Therefore, while information about the magic could leak, its origin couldn't.

As a result of such research on soul-binding magic,

"I was told I have to live like this."

Charlotte had heard the outcome not too long ago.

At Charlotte's calm words, Bertus furrowed his brows. Judging by his reaction, it seemed he was hearing it for the first time.

"You don't seem too disappointed, though?"

Indeed, Charlotte had been stoic when she heard that her condition couldn't be healed with the soul-binding magic.

As expected, it had come to this.

That was her only sentiment.

Bertus's expression hardened.

"Sister, you might not believe me, but I'm genuinely regretful about having to kill you.

Not long ago, it would have been enough to turn Reinhardt against me, but now I have to turn Ellen Artorius against me as well. Even if it's right for me to kill you and the entire continent agrees with it. Fundamentally, those two are stubborn. In my opinion, Ellen Artorius is just as crazy as Reinhardt or even more so, just less obvious. Of course, it's not that I can't handle those two. But after killing you, am I supposed to kill the two heroes who are treated as humanity's hope? Then I should pray for people to hang me without pain."

Bertus rambled on with a genuinely annoyed and flustered expression.

"Considering my situation, it's ironic that you're the one who's in trouble. At this point, I might even want to thank the Demon King."

Charlotte covered her mouth and giggled, imagining the difficulties Bertus would face after her death.

Bertus glared at Charlotte with a grim expression and crossed his arms.

"Listen, sister, you seem too carefree, thinking it's all over when you die. But consider my situation. I'm torn between killing you to prevent the revival of the previous Demon King Valier and risking my own life, or letting the previous Demon King be resurrected and grinding the continent's power to wage a legitimate war against the Demon King without Ragan Artorius. On top of that, the current Demon King issue still remains as another problem. Even if I survive physically, the stress will kill me. Definitely."

While Bertus's words contained some exaggeration, they weren't exactly wrong.

If Charlotte were to die now, Bertus would also have to die.

If they waited until the Demon King had completely taken control of Charlotte's body, Bertus would have a legitimate cause, but a massive sacrifice would occur when they had to subdue the resurrected Demon King.

Ellen had become her knight and Reinhardt held her dear.

Only two facts had made her life feel unbearably heavy.

Heavy it was, then light, then heavy again.

Charlotte found the changes rather amusing.

Bertus's concern was undoubtedly justified.

"Well, I can't be sure either, and I don't know if you'll believe me… but I have a feeling that nothing like that will happen."

“…On what basis?"

Reinhardt had told her many times.

By harboring the Spirit Speech, the world's one-of-a-kind supernatural power.

Nothing would happen.

You'll be fine.

Nothing would happen.

Among the countless whispers that seemed to bring peace to her heart, Charlotte unconsciously believed.

I'll be fine.

Even if this power were to corrode her, she wouldn't lose her will, so maybe she was completely fine now.

That's what he said.

Charlotte trusts Reinhardt.

She trusts the numerous whispers of the Spirit speech that Reinhardt had bestowed upon her, and thus, she believes in the changes in her body and soul.

"I'm sure I'll be fine."

"No, I mean, on what basis?"

Charlotte grins at Bertus.

Swoosh

"!"

Charlotte's hair turns pitch black, and she transforms into a devilish figure with bloodshot, vertically slit pupils and black irises.

Her hair, tainted with darkness and wavering in midair, and the horrifying figure reminiscent of a demon or even the Devil King, made Bertus's face turn pale.

"Look."

A sinister voice, like a scratch on darkness, resonated, and as Charlotte gestured, dozens of dark spears appeared in the air.

The spears were aimed at Bertus, but they remained stationary without the slightest movement.

"I won't kill you even in this state."

"No, you… what on earth is this…?"

"Isn't this evidence enough?"

Charlotte had become one with the Devil King.

To be precise, she had gained control of a portion of the Devil King's power.

This was a gift from Reinhardt.

The life that would have been lost without Reinhardt had now been granted additional power as a bonus - the power of the Devil King.

Soul absorption was not an alternative.

"Why should I give this up, instead?"

But now that things had come to this, the only thing Charlotte could trust was this power.

—---

"If that was meant to scare me, it worked too well, sister."

As if not denying that he was scared, Bertus slowly nodded.

At his words, Charlotte's wavering hair settled back into place, and her hair and pupils returned to their original state.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you scared. I should thank the Devil King."

"Could you cut the ridiculous jokes?"

Admitting to being scared was brave enough. For an ordinary person, suddenly seeing someone turn into a demonic figure and try to kill them would usually result in fainting.

Undoubtedly, to Bertus, it did not appear as if Charlotte was being dominated by the Demon King; rather, she seemed to be properly wielding the Demon King's power. Of course, whether her condition was actually fine as Charlotte claimed could not be confirmed, but at the moment, it was undeniable that she was in a stable state.

Naturally, it was a power that could not be revealed to the outside world. Even those who were unaware of the specifics would likely agree that if Charlotte were to expose her true power, it would be an extremely unpleasant and ominous sight.

It was no more than an emergency measure, a last resort for Charlotte.

Although this power was potent, it would be impossible to survive if it became widely known across the empire's numerous knights and the continent. And that was why the power that could move countless forces with just a single word was so terrifying.

"Why did you bring up that topic? I don't think you asked just to praise me."

At Charlotte's question, Bertus crossed his arms and stared intently at her.

"Of course, I'm curious about the source. Where did you get the magic book related to the providence of handling souls? Did you establish a connection with some secret organization?"

"Oh, is that it?"

Bertus seemed unaware that Charlotte had been to the Demon King's castle, even though he knew about the labyrinth.

She could tell him the source. However, she believed that only she, who possessed the soul of the Demon King, could penetrate the labyrinth.

"Why, do you think there's anything else?"

"What's the point in telling?"

Neither Bertus nor Charlotte was a magician.

They knew that rare magic books held tremendous value. And they weren't merchants who would convert that value into money; instead, they would supply the magic to the army to strengthen their military power.

Powerful magic was a force in itself. No matter how dangerous the magic or how perilous the spell, there was never too much power for those in control.

There would be no issue in telling Bertus the source. After all, she was the only one who could enter that place.

However, she had no reason to give him that information.

Although she couldn't become an emperor, she could establish a cooperative relationship with Bertus.

The things in the Demon King's underground castle would become Charlotte's assets.

It was a life of indebting herself to Ellen and indebting herself to Reinhardt while accumulating wealth.

If Bertus discovered her usefulness on his own, perhaps someday she could face the two of them without a sense of obligation.

"Alright. I'll bring you a few more volumes."

"Shall we make a deal?"

"The fewer cards you have, the more you need to cherish them."

Charlotte would bring him quite a substantial number of magic books, even though she said it would only be a few.

It didn't matter if he realized that it was the dark vision of Darkland, or if he noticed that it was discovered in the Demon King's underground castle afterward.

Because only she could enter there.

—---

"Uh…"

"…"

Upon seeing Harriet, Reinhardt hesitated and moved past her.

Not knowing what to say, she had been avoiding Reinhardt recently.

Harriet had seen Ellen and Reinhardt talking normally as they had in the past. She had also seen Ellen, who had become a guardian knight, and Charlotte bickering strangely. And she had seen the three of them walking around together.

Harriet had no idea what she should do.

When Reinhardt announced his engagement, it felt as though her mind had been completely emptied.

She could neither concentrate on her studies nor her research.

She couldn't tell him not to go through with the decision, as it was to save Charlotte's life.

And so, she wondered if all she could do was watch.

Continuing to watch, she thought that perhaps she should distance herself.

But when Ellen became Charlotte's knight, the engagement disappeared as though it had been a lie.

It was something she couldn't do herself.

It was only possible for Ellen Artorious, the younger sister of Ragan Artorious and the owner of Lament.

Because Ellen, who had a more powerful symbolic presence than Reinhardt, could guarantee Charlotte's safety by becoming her knight.

Ellen did what she could not, and so Reinhardt no longer needed to get engaged.

She should have been happy, she thought.

But Harriet didn't feel any happiness at all.

So even when she saw Reinhardt and Ellen together again like before, Harriet couldn't bring herself to feel that way.

She knew that if she approached him and started a casual conversation, he would treat her like before.

But still.

In the end, wouldn't that be the limit?

Reinhardt would always feel somewhat guilty towards her.

Apologizing.

Always apologizing.

That was all there was to it.

She could not go any further than that.

She had always thought she was second to Ellen.

But that wasn't the case.

She had always been last.

Whether it was mending their relationship or receiving attention.

Sometimes Charlotte came first.

Sometimes Ellen came first.

Even Olivia had been first at times.

But she had always been next.

The arrogant Harriet of the past would have been furious and angry, thinking that she didn't deserve such treatment.

But the humble Harriet, who had decided to treat people as people and live an ordinary life, had been gradually worn down.

She knew that expecting anything was difficult, but this much was enough. That he had given her this much attention, that this much was enough. That she should be grateful for this much.

Before she knew it.

She was facing her self-esteem that had not become humility but had fallen into an abyss.

It would be fine if he didn't hold her hand.

It would be fine if he didn't embrace her.

Feeling herself surrendering to a satisfaction mixed with resignation, believing that just being by his side was enough.

This was wrong.

Being satisfied with someone who didn't like her but cared for her out of guilt was just miserable.

If her heart was to admit defeat in the end, wasn't it better to fold?

"Harriet, are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh… yeah."

At Adelia's worried words, Harriet nodded her head.

If her feelings wouldn't be reciprocated, she should fold them.

Reinhardt had climbed too high, unlike before. Perhaps he had become someone she couldn't even look at.

The seed sown in the soil of her heart had grown into a flower.

But like a flower that withered without bearing fruit.

If it were to wither, then only her feelings should wither.

The soil where flowers withered, it was a feeling as if even oneself was wilting away.

—---

Harriet left the temple and headed for the royal palace.

As she set out, she made a resolution.

To forget.

Slowly.

When she becomes indifferent, when all the painful feelings disappear, they can return to being ordinary friends.

Harriet believes that Reinhardt would also want that.

Just like how Liana can act comfortably around Reinhardt because she doesn't like him, Harriet should be able to do the same.

Let's talk after a long time has passed.

Then she can say that she had liked him.

Very much.

That she had liked him a great deal.

"…"

Upon stepping onto the street, Harriet eventually broke down in tears in the middle of the road.

"Terrible… Terrible… Such a terrible person…"

Even though he knew she liked him.

Although they didn't have a proper conversation because something might break, in the end, he knew everything.

It was unbearable to feel hurt and sad. Maybe she should speak up.

Maybe she should curse him, call him the worst person in the world.

There's no reason to like him.

He's just an extremely terrible person, and she knows it's her fault for liking someone like that.

It would be better to hate him, as the feelings of inferiority and defeat would disappear.

Let's dislike him.

Just hate him and despise him. Pretend not to know after shooting him a look that says he's a terrible person.

Will they return to being friends later? There's no such thing.

With that resolution, Harriet walked the streets, rode the magic train, and headed for the royal palace.

Chapter 408

Harriet wanted to distance herself from Reinhardt.

However, she knew that the best way to sort out her complicated feelings was to immerse herself in something.

When she memorized complex magical formulas or faced difficult problems, her distracting thoughts would disappear. Harriet often cleared her mind through study and research.

So Harriet devoted herself to her research.

Even the research, the warp gate study leading to another world that Reinhardt had suggested, was miserable. But it was the only thing Harriet could cling to.

When her duties at the temple were finished, Harriet headed to the royal palace.

Studying the warp gate system in the archives of the Royal Magic Department was originally Reinhardt's idea, but Harriet had also become interested in it.

The magical system, built up over a long time.

Understanding the vast system that countless archmages had worked on was an eye-opening experience in itself.

Warp gate research required a basic understanding of dimensional magic. So Harriet had raised her understanding to a level where she could potentially develop a small-scale gate system herself.

Due to recent events, the atmosphere around the temple had changed significantly.

"The hero is…"

"It would be great if he came out of the temple…"

There were quite a few more people milling around the temple.

The reason was none other than to see Reinhardt and Ellen.

Just as Reinhardt and Ellen gained fame inside the temple and people followed them around, there were people stationed outside the temple as well.

Most people didn't even know what Reinhardt and Ellen looked like, so even if the two came out of the temple, they wouldn't be recognized. The temple guards kept an eye on the crowd, just in case they caused a commotion.

"The reincarnation of Artorious…"

There were people who made incomprehensible remarks. Harriet had heard of the strange cult that believed in the reincarnation of Ragan Artorious.

Could those people be gathered here? Did they believe the strange rumors that Reinhardt was the reincarnation of Artorious?

Harriet could not understand the oddity of these people.

But there was a result.

The hope of humanity.

Reinhardt and Ellen, and Olivia, who had somehow become such existences.

She felt small and insignificant.

There was no reason to feel insignificant, but when faced with something so immense, it was natural to lose confidence.

So Harriet decided to give up.

She walked past the crowd and headed towards the royal palace.

—---

Upon arriving at the Royal Magic Department, Harriet noticed an unusual atmosphere and tilted her head.

In front of the research materials reading room, numerous magicians were huddled

together, watching a pile of books.

"Ah… This method…"

"Amazing…"

"Where did this come from…?"

A considerable amount of magical books. The magicians examining the materials in front of them appeared to be high-ranking officials of the Magic Department, not just low-level staff.

Harriet frequented the magical library, but she wasn't particularly close to the royal magicians. Seeing that they were in the middle of an important conversation, Harriet headed straight for the reading room she usually visited.

Harriet had almost no acquaintances among the magicians in the library. Everyone knew that she, the princess, had royal permission to conduct important research, so no one approached her to strike up a conversation.

Her only acquaintances were the entrance manager controlling the front desk and the librarian in charge of the eighth reading room.

The young magician before her had helped Harriet with advice on understanding dimensional magic or finding the necessary materials.

He served as a research assistant and advisor, explaining things like imaginary dimensions.

Of course, he didn't initiate conversation unless Harriet needed help.

Although they didn't know each other very well, Harriet knew this magician was quite friendly. He would provide detailed but concise explanations about areas Harriet was unfamiliar with, never making her ask a question twice.

She had only learned his name recently.

Roswin, Harriet recalled.

However, the usually friendly librarian, who greeted her warmly, seemed to be

completely unaware of Harriet's arrival and just sat there, staring blankly.

Seeing no reason to pretend to know him, Harriet cautiously sat down at a distance, and he flinched, apparently having heard her.

"Ah, Your Highness, have you arrived?"

"Ah… just now."

It seemed he had been preoccupied with something, not even hearing Harriet's entrance. Finally regaining his senses, he returned to his usual slightly smiling expression.

"It's been a while since your last visit."

"I've been dealing with some matters."

It was more about emotional difficulties than actual problems, but Harriet didn't bother to explain.

"By the way, it's noisier outside than usual."

Remembering Reinhardt's face as she spoke, Harriet forcibly changed the subject.

Upon seeing Harriet's curiosity, the young magician softly smiled and glanced at the entrance of the reading room.

"Ah, are you referring to that? It seems a large number of rare magical books have been acquired from somewhere. It's not common to discover such a quantity of rare grimoires."

"Grimoires, you say…"

"Yes. The source is confidential for now, but there's a possibility that they were brought from a newly discovered labyrinth in Darkland."

A labyrinth in Darkland.

Harriet tilted her head, as this was the first time she had heard such a story.

"A labyrinth?"

"Yes, it hasn't been fully explored yet… There appear to be a few adventurers who have returned with these rare magical books. It's presumed to be the tomb of a lich, and although we don't know which lich, it's expected to be a very powerful one. Of course, with that many grimoires discovered, the tomb exploration might already be over. But still, it's quite rare…"

Roswin's demeanor seemed a bit enigmatic as he concluded his speech.

He had always been thought of as simply diligent and intelligent, but now, there was clearly something mysterious about him.

"I don't know if it'll be my turn, but I'd like to take a look if I can. Although, I doubt it'll happen…"

It was hard to describe, but there was a strange feeling about him.

Although the nature of the spark in his eyes was unknown, there was something in them that seemed to captivate people's hearts.

However, for a mage, such a look wasn't all that unusual.

It was only natural for a mage to be interested in rare magical tomes.

But the Tomb of the Lich.

A large number of scrolls, believed to have been discovered within.

There was no way of knowing for sure, but it was highly likely that it contained extremely powerful magic, as yet unknown to the world.

A dangerous power.

But also, a powerful one.

After a moment of contemplation, Harriet suddenly realized.

If one possessed excessively dangerous knowledge, they would merely become an excessively dangerous mage.

Harriet repeated in her mind the words the Grand Duke of Saint Owan often said as a habit.

"I'm curious. Just where did they find such precious magic…?"

Harriet couldn't shake the feeling that the mage's eyes, as he spoke of the magical tome, were a bit… off.

Where on earth did they get it from?… Where…

A barely audible murmur sent a chill down Harriet's spine.

—---

White Palace, Arunaria.

"Your Highness, the documents you requested last time have arrived from the Association."

"Hmm… I see."

The Grand Duke of Saint Owan took out the report brought by the messenger in his palace office. As he read through the report, he commented in passing.

"Is it difficult to get the original?"

"Yes, they said it's not classified as top-secret, but it's considered the Association's property."

"How ridiculous. Claiming ownership over magic they didn't even develop themselves."

The report the Grand Duke was reading contained a list of books and a brief description of their contents.

A theory on the simplification of magic formulas for increased efficiency in fire magic composition.

Methods for improving and increasing mana density.

Optimization of mana utilization within the body.

Although the titles of the books did not exactly reflect these theories, the contents revealed that analyzing the recorded magic had led to the discovery of such theories.

Whether these theories would actually be effective or not was unknown, and the Grand Duke, who had not seen the magical tome himself, could not tell if they were truly valid.

"A labyrinth believed to be the Tomb of the Lich… And from the magical tomes that adventurers have roughly picked up and brought out, they can extract this much magical theory…"

There were countless unexplored regions in Darkland, and numerous dungeons that had not yet been properly explored. It was impossible to know about all these dungeons, unexplored regions, and hazardous areas.

The recently discovered Tomb of the Lich was one such unexplored region. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have been an issue significant enough to be reported to the Grand Duke.

The important factor was the handful of magical tomes brought out by the adventurers who had barely managed to escape after wandering through the tomb.

Magic books are divided into two categories: theory books and spellbooks.

Four types of spellbooks.

Although it wouldn't completely overturn all the magic theories used so far, it was enough to derive significant improvements.

However, it was a tremendous discovery to have a more efficient method written in the magic books than the methods used so far, not to mention the inherent value of the magic books themselves and their magical worth.

The Tomb of the Lich.

It wasn't entirely unraveled, but a few magic books, nearly by-products, contained such content.

The last line of the report read as follows:

-The association considers the possibility that an Archlich may exist in the dungeon.

The Archlich.

A legendary being, as universally nonexistent as dragons, a creature of fantasy.

The association had to make such an irrational judgment because no one knew what was truly dormant within the Tomb of the Lich discovered this time.

How long had it studied magic to possess such spells?

Then what could be contained in the real vision of that Lich?

However, it was difficult to identify the labyrinth's true nature within the Lich's dungeon, and both the association and guilds were not yet directly involved due to the potential danger.

Mages were generally cautious, and so were the archdukes.

Adventurers were akin to rainwater seeping in for money.

If they risked their lives to retrieve the magic books, the association, guilds, or even archdukes could simply buy them. There was no reason to take the risk themselves.

However.

If the magic books were acquired by the guild or association, the archduke would only hear about the discoveries made. Mages were so closed-off that even those in the guilds or associations were reluctant to share their visions with one another.

It was fortunate that they even informed mages outside their group of their accomplishments, however superficially.

"Hmm…"

It was best to claim it before it was taken away.

However, the association, guild, and perhaps even the royal family might be

interested in this as well.

If not adventurers, but the Magic Association, the Mage Guild, or the royal family formed a group for dungeon exploration, it would be unraveled, even if it was the Archlich's tomb.

What truly lies in this tomb?

Dangerous knowledge creates only dangerous mages.

And.

The labyrinth, undoubtedly containing numerous dangerous spells, would give birth to countless dangerous mages.

The true nature of the labyrinth must be discovered.

To prevent dangerous magic from being unleashed upon the world, if nothing else.

"Tell the mage squad to prepare."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The archduke was planning to go out after a long time.

Chapter 409

"No, did you already complete it?"

Upon hearing Roswin's words, Harriet calmly nodded.

"Ah… Yes."

"Your Highness, this is not a matter to be discussed so simply. You have changed the history of the Warp Gates, and through that, the history of the continent itself."

"Ah… Is that so?"

Although Roswin made a fuss, Harriet didn't seem particularly moved.

"Your Highness, you have solved a conundrum that countless Warp Gate theorists had given up on. You can be more, much more, excited about it!"

Roswin's voice echoed through the quiet reading room. It was a reaction of such intensity that it felt slightly incongruous compared to his usual calm demeanor, but Harriet didn't feel it was that remarkable.

It was never an easy problem, but she had managed to solve it during her intermittent research. That was all there was to it.

"Your Highness, you do understand what you've accomplished, don't you?"

"Yes? Ah… If the imaginary dimension map is re-established, we will no longer have to pass through Warp Gates multiple times to reach our destination, but rather, travel directly from a small gate at the northernmost point of the continent to a small gate at the southernmost point… Isn't that the case?"

"You know this, so why aren't you more surprised?"

"…"

Harriet opened her mouth to say something but then closed it.

She had almost said that it wasn't her brilliance, but rather the previous Warp Gate system had been too foolishly operated. However, that would be disrespectful to all the magicians who had built the system throughout history, so she couldn't bring herself to say it.

And for the same reason, she couldn't ask why it hadn't been done until now.

As with most technological advancements, Harriet had found inspiration from inconvenience.

The Warp Gate system provided immense convenience, but ultimately, it had its drawbacks.

If one thinks of small Warp Gates as having a range of 1, medium Warp Gates as 2, large Warp Gates as 3, and extra-large as 4, it's easier to understand.

Since Warp Gates connect to all other Warp Gates within their range, extra-large Warp Gates naturally connect to a significant number of other gates.

That's why the extra-large Warp Gates had been built at the ends of their respective ranges, connecting the entire continent.

However, this method had a chronic problem: to travel long distances, one had to pass through multiple gates. As not all places on the continent were connected by the overlapping ranges of extra-large Warp Gates, it was necessary to pass through a series of medium and small gates.

To travel from the Imperial capital to a remote village at the southernmost edge of Kernstadt, one had to go through the following sequence: Imperial Capital's extra-large Warp Gate → Kernstadt's extra-large Warp Gate → regional large Warp Gate → another medium Warp Gate at a waypoint → and finally, the destination's small Warp Gate.

In this way, they had to move. It was an extreme case, but it wasn't as if such instances didn't exist.

As a result, inevitably, large warp gates where people flocked were prone to congestion, just as it was happening now, and the main large warp gates also had waiting lines.

The royal crest that Reinhardt and Ellen possessed served as a warp gate fast pass, saving them a significant amount of time, thanks to the structure of passing through the warp gate system's waypoints.

However, Harriet found herself up against a fundamental question she couldn't understand: why did they need to disembark at an intermediate point and re-enter the warp gate system, which was interconnected like a spider web?

Couldn't they just use the connected dimensional gateways directly and go straight to their destination without having to transfer at warp gate waypoints?

Harriet pointed out why they didn't operate the warp gate this way, and Roswin's answer was simple:

Because it had always been done that way.

Of course, this implied countless problems that were difficult to express with just those words.

Warp gates hadn't suddenly fallen from the sky to connect the entire continent; they had gradually taken their current form through a series of trial runs, slowly being completed one at a time. In other words, the basic system was created without the intention of connecting the entire continent, but it ended up doing so anyway.

The map of the imaginary dimension used for direct connections in the warp gate system had also been slowly completed over time. As a result, the complex structure was a system built by numerous mages over hundreds of years.

As many people participated in the system, problems were bound to arise inevitably.

Comparing it to road construction, some built straight routes, others curved ones, yet others elliptical, and still others spiral-shaped. Each person had built it their way.

Each mage had drawn the map their way, and as it continued to be used, it became impossible to change, and any attempt to tamper with it could potentially destroy the entire warp gate system.

Maintenance after maintenance, the imaginary dimension map and the warp gate's base system were now akin to a colossal pile of excrement. They could maintain the system, but it was impossible to improve it, and they were left with no choice but to

continue using it in its current form and manner.

Many warp gate technicians didn't fail to come up with Harriet's idea for improvement; they simply couldn't do it. They would have to comprehend the entire structure of the imaginary dimension accumulated over a hundred years, redraw the warp gate's imaginary dimension map that connected the entire continent from scratch, and completely overhaul the warp gate's basic operation—an insane task.

And yet, Harriet had done it.

Even while she was sobbing alone, shocked by the news of Reinhardt's engagement, complaining about her lack of focus and how difficult it was.

In simple terms.

Harriet had transformed the tiny, almost junk-like warp gate of the provincial neighborhood into one that functioned like the massive warp gates in front of the Temples, the Holy Knight Orders, or the Imperial Palace.

No, even more than that.

While large warp gates have a limited range, by applying the imaginary dimensional map that Harriet had conceived, one could travel directly to any warp gate within the joint range where the warp gate system was established.

In other words, although one couldn't reach Edina Archipelago, where a separate small-scale warp gate system was built, they could travel anywhere on the continent.

"You could be happier about this, Your Highness!"

"Well, if you say so…"

It was said that sadness could fuel growth.

This magic genius had changed history while sobbing in her room and scribbling in her notebook because things weren't going well with her crush.

In conclusion, the warp gate operation problems that had existed until now would be solved in a snap with the proper use of Harriet's new warp gate-based system and the imaginary dimensional map. Of course, it couldn't be applied immediately, and

its stability had to be verified through experts' hands by going through trials, verifications, and test runs.

Harriet had already achieved a feat that no other archmage had accomplished before.

She knew this was a significant research achievement, but since it wasn't that difficult for her, she didn't understand Roswin's excited state.

Thus, a natural conclusion.

'I really am a genius… '

Harriet realized it anew.

"If only I had known Your Highness sooner, it would have been so much fun."

"?"

Roswin's words still gave off a strange feeling of incongruity to Harriet.

This person, today, seemed different from usual.

Harriet felt the odd incongruity but didn't yet know its identity.

"Seeing the Five Stars you possess makes me feel so inadequate. Now, the next research material is here."

Roser changed the subject when he saw Harriet's confusion.

"Ah, yes… Thank you."

"No, it's always enjoyable just watching a genius at work."

Genius.

It was a word she had heard over and over, and while she admitted it herself, Harriet wondered what it truly meant.

The title of being the greatest genius in the history of magic was merely a term to glorify her, wasn't it? Harriet still knew that she lacked a lot, and she knew about her

classmates and seniors who were far ahead of her in different fields.

She couldn't be humanity's hope. She couldn't even stand alongside them.

Developing an innovative way to use the warp gate had nothing to do with power.

The sense of inferiority felt by a genius.

What could she do with this level of research?

She needed something to focus her mind on, but there was nothing Harriet wanted to gain through this research.

In the end, she had presented an improved warp gate system, but that wasn't her real goal.

Discovering a way to create a dimensional gate that leads to another world didn't mean Reinhardt would pay any attention to her.

Would anything really change if she created one?

Just like the last time, he might try to hide it if he deemed it too dangerous a magic.

The head of the magic department looked at Harriet with a pleased expression.

While he considered himself a genius, the person before him could not be anything less than a genius as well. After all, it was impossible for someone who managed the Royal Magic Department's research library at such a young age not to be a genius.

In the public's perception, magicians were geniuses, and among magicians, a young one serving as the head of the magic department was surely a genius among geniuses. For her to receive such praise was indeed a remarkable feat.

However, that didn't grant Harriet any real benefits.

"Excuse me for asking such a question, but may I ask something?"

"Huh? Oh… Yes."

"Although Your Highness is not a warp gate technician, why are you studying the

warp gate system?"

It was indeed a valid question.

Although it was true that warp gate-related magicians were made up of high-ranking ones, in the end, it was too practical a magic for the Grand Duchess of the Saint Owan Duchy to study.

Harriet tried to recall why she had started this research.

A dimensional gate leading to another world, dimensional magic, and if it's dimensional magic, then warp gates.

It was a simple cause and effect. It's just that it wasn't due to her own curiosity.

How would the other person react if she said she wanted to know the way to another world?

Although she thought it would be laughed at, Harriet couldn't help but burst into laughter herself.

"I was curious if there was a way to go to another world."

“…Pardon?"

Her counterpart seemed taken aback, as if they hadn't expected such an answer.

Scratching her cheek, Harriet realized it sounded ridiculous even after saying it out loud.

"Well, there probably isn't, right?"

She had gone this far just to indulge Reinhardt's unnecessary curiosity. Since she had no intention of getting closer to Reinhardt, wouldn't it be better to stop indulging in this task he had requested?

That's what Harriet thought.

"Well… we can't know whether or not such a world exists… rather than saying it doesn't exist, it's more appropriate to call it an unknown territory…”

The magician before her mumbled with a dumbfounded expression before tilting his head.

"Maybe we both have similar desires."

Another incomprehensible statement.

Did this person also want to open a dimensional gate connected to another world?

But unlike his usual gentle smile, Harriet couldn't find any certainty in his ambiguous grin.

"You've been saying strange things for a while now."

Harriet couldn't help but ask this time, but Roswin merely scratched his head nonchalantly.

"Haha, maybe I'm just a bit excited. I keep letting slip these odd remarks."

What did he mean by "excited"?

"By the way, Your Highness, what do you think of this idea?"

"What idea?"

"Instead of creating a dimensional gate that leads to another world, wouldn't it be easier to create another world? I mean, that kind of idea."

What on earth was this incomprehensible statement? Creating another world was better than a dimensional gate connecting to it?

"Of course, for a mediocre magician like myself, it would be an impossible task. But for Your Highness, the Archduchess, who possesses the pinnacle of magical abilities, wouldn't it be entirely possible to achieve this alone? If it's Your Highness, becoming the god of a new world would be a matter of course…"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Harriet cut off Roswin's words midway.

Harriet strongly felt that this man was recounting a story that only he knew – a story that existed solely in his head.

An inexplicable discomfort began to take root at the bottom of her heart.

She hadn't realized it before, but something about this man felt incredibly off.

His usually smooth demeanor seemed to falter slightly, accompanied by nonsensical statements that appeared out of the blue, and an unreadable gaze.

Instinctively, Harriet felt she needed to leave.

This man was dangerous.

She no longer wanted to continue their conversation.

"I should be going now. It's getting late…"

"What a shame, Your Highness."

As Harriet glanced around and rose from her seat, Roswin smiled.

"I was hoping to talk a little more with you today. Is there any way we could stay just a bit longer…?"

"…We can always talk later. It's really late tonight."

"Ah… I see."

His words seemed to accept her reasoning, but his expression did not.

That was the breaking point.

Was he planning to force a conversation even if she didn't want to? Harriet felt her blood run cold at Roswin's sudden change in demeanor.

As he got up from his seat, slightly trembling, a faint, sinister smile formed at the corners of his mouth.

"Then, farewell."

He merely bowed deeply toward Harriet.

As if fleeing, Harriet rushed out of the reading room.

An unidentified sense of crisis enveloped her entire being.

Chapter 410

Having left the palace, Harriet quickened her pace.

The man she had thought to be a good advisor until now had shown her a completely different side, and the intense sense of unease she felt soon turned into a chilling fear.

Though nothing had actually happened to her, Harriet was able to intuitively sense through their few conversations that he was not a normal magician.

He seemed to be following her.

For some reason, she felt certain of it.

He constantly muttered strange things and spoke to her in ways she couldn't discern the intentions behind.

If only she had known him sooner, she might have appreciated his almost divine level of praise, but even then, she couldn't understand the nonsense he spouted about being a god of a new world.

A normal magician would never say such things.

Harriet had walked the path of an elite magician.

Magicianship was fundamentally the study of geniuses, but there were also street magicians, and those who learned magic from them certainly existed.

They were usually madmen and eccentrics.

Harriet had heard that there were countless lunatics who enjoyed tormenting those without talent for magic by teaching them magic forcibly.

Soon enough.

As an elite magician, Harriet had little experience dealing with such mad magicians.

Her father was a grand magician, and those who taught her magic were generally sane magicians with clean thoughts.

The only madman she had dealt with was Aaron Mede, who had created a chimera in the basement of her mansion some time ago.

So, it was only natural for her to be engulfed in fear when Roswin, who seemed perfectly fine, started spouting strange nonsense.

The legendary villains she heard about from her older brother or father as a child were certainly not like this.

However, Harriet could feel in real-time just how terrifying it was to face someone with immeasurable madness.

She repeatedly looked back as she walked.

Was he following her?

She had the feeling that he was somehow obsessed with her.

What on earth would he do to her if he was indeed following her?

Her steps quickened, and even among the passengers on the magical train heading back to the temple, Harriet was sweating cold sweat.

Nothing had happened, but it felt as if something was about to.

Though she knew her anxiety was probably unfounded, Harriet couldn't help feeling restless.

The strange gazes he cast upon her.

The burning desire in his eyes when he talked about magic books.

The completely incomprehensible and nonsensical ramblings.

Hoping that such a mad magician would not try to harm her in any way, Harriet practically ran back to the temple once she got off the train.

A slight sense of relief washed over her as she crossed the temple gate, but it wasn't enough.

The tram was empty because it was nighttime.

Only a few students were on the tram, busy with their own affairs, while Harriet looked around nervously, sweat dripping from her brow.

The thought of being caught up in a situation where she might become the target of a mad magician, something she had never heard of, made her blood run cold.

It must be a mere delusion, she thought. Lately, her nerves had been on edge, causing her to overreact to trivial matters.

But even so, the bizarre stories she had heard from Roswin made it difficult for her to dismiss the possibility altogether.

With a heavy heart filled with dread, Harriet finally arrived at the Royal Class Dormitory's bus stop and entered the building.

And then,

As soon as she returned to the second-year dormitory, Harriet instantly felt the fear and anxiety that had been gnawing at her dissipate.

"Uh…"

Reinhardt, with a towel draped around his neck as if he had just taken a shower, met her gaze as he walked towards the lobby.

Lately, it had always been like this; Reinhardt hesitated for a moment but never initiated a conversation with her.

However, he was there.

And she believed that Reinhardt would somehow manage to help her.

She didn't want to admit it, but she couldn't deny it either.

The anxiety that had been gripping her heart vanished like a lie the moment she saw

Reinhardt's face.

"Ah…"

Her tension reflexively released upon seeing Reinhardt, and Harriet's legs suddenly went weak.

Stagger!

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

Just before Harriet collapsed, Reinhardt quickly caught her. Leaning on him, she bit her lip.

There were certainly people stronger than Reinhardt, and many more reliable than him.

But why did his face bring her such a profound sense of relief?

"Why are you covered in cold sweat?"

Reinhardt hesitated but couldn't help checking on Harriet's complexion cautiously.

The reason Harriet felt reassured when she saw Reinhardt, she thought she knew it.

It was because he was a bad person.

He was a madman who would impulsively propose a marriage to protect someone precious to him, like he did when he learned of Charlotte's life being in danger.

He was a bad person because he would do such things, knowing full well that it would hurt those around him.

And so, if something happened to her like it did to Charlotte,

He would somehow, by any means necessary, come through for her.

He might be a bad person and shameless,

But he had always come through in the past, and she believed he would again.

That's why Harriet couldn't help but feel relieved when she saw Reinhardt.

Harriet wanted to hate Reinhardt, instead.

"Hey… why are you like this? Did something happen?"

She wanted to hate him and, in fact, did hate him.

But as much as she hated him, she trusted Reinhardt.

"I don't know… I don't even know why I'm like this…"

And because she liked Reinhardt more than she hated him,

"Just… just… stay like this for a moment. Just stay like this for a moment…"

"Uh, what? Uh… uh. Okay, I got it…"

In the end, Harriet could not hate Reinhardt any more than she already did.

—---

"Do you think it's a misconception?"

"…Ah. Now that I think about it, I was just scared for no reason. Nothing actually happened."

What's this?

I thought Harriet was caught up in something serious, but she said it wasn't a big deal after all.

"No, it's just… People keep praising me as a genius and… There's this person… It's a bit suspicious, I guess. I wonder if they have some hidden agenda. They said some strange things, but it seems like they were just weird… I don't know how to put it. I was just scared for no reason."

"Delusions?"

At my words, Harriet's face turned bright red.

"Uh… delusions, I think…"

What could it be?

According to Lucinil's way of speaking, did our little cutie have some sort of axe-to-grind attribute? Probably not.

"It just felt like that person was following me, coming after me. I was scared… But now that I think about it, they were just strange… They never did anything bad to me or asked anything of me deliberately… There are many eccentric magicians, so… When I think about it, that person isn't that odd. I think I just misunderstood."

Her embarrassment made her pronunciation jumble and her speech adorable.

And it's nice to be able to see this cute sight without much guilt.

In the end, she got so scared because the research assistant, who had been helping her, excessively praised her, that she ran away to the temple.

I still don't know what strange things were said, but magicians are known for their bizarre statements, and it's not just a one-time thing.

Anyway.

I was stuck, wondering if I should distance myself from Harriet, but Harriet took the initiative.

It's fortunate that it wasn't a serious matter after all. I was worried something terrible had happened, and my heart sank.

It's a relief if it was just a misunderstanding.

Because of the misunderstanding, we can now talk like this, quite normally.

Harriet and I were sitting face-to-face in the dining hall.

And I met Harriet right after finishing my duel with Ellen and taking a shower.

"…"

"Ah, Ellen…”

So, it was natural for Ellen, who had just finished her shower, to come to the dining hall for a meal.

Ellen looked at Harriet and me, who were sitting face-to-face, and then sat down next to Harriet.

As if it were obvious.

"Is there something you want to eat?"

Our stoic friend asked, her eyes practically shining.

"I'll make something for you today."

It seemed like she was quite fond of this situation. Harriet looked at Ellen with a complicated expression, not knowing what to say.

It seemed like she was about to smile, but also like she might cry.

With a complex expression.

"Do… do I… feel hungry?"

"What's with you?"

And then, a rather unfamiliar voice for the A-class dormitory, even at this ambitious hour, came from behind us.

"Is it really appropriate for a mere knight to be ordering around their lord like this?"

With her arms folded, Charlotte stared at Ellen with an annoyed expression.

No way, did Ellen actually summon Charlotte herself?

"I can cook well. I'll make something for you."

"My knight doesn't particularly need to be skilled with a knife, you know?"

"Well, there's no need to be bad at it either. I'm better than you, who can't do either."

"Is that so? How can you be sure I can't cook when you've never seen me do it?"

"Obviously, you can't because you grew up in an environment where you couldn't possibly learn to cook well."

“…Fine! I can't! I can't cook! But did you call me just to pick a fight? In the middle of the night?"

"I called you to make food, but you're the one who started the fight. I was just trying to be considerate. You're the one who makes a fuss over nothing."

“…Who taught you to be so annoying when you're right?"

Ellen silently pointed at me with a gesture.

How can she be so good at getting under people's skin when she doesn't seem like it?

It's driving me crazy.

"Wow… Now you're making me angry without even saying a word?"

"Getting angry easily, that's a sickness."

I've been seeing this kind of situation more often lately.

Charlotte and Ellen have a bad chemistry, unlike Ellen and Olivia.

And Ellen seems to talk more when she's with Charlotte? When she argues with Olivia, she just says things like "go away" or "I don't like it."

"Anyway, what do you want to eat?"

At Ellen's question, Charlotte grinned.

"Beef Bourguignon."

What should I do?

Our First Princess started acting spoiled.

But what followed was even worse.

"Use only tenderloin for the meat. I usually like fatty cuts, but I'm on a diet these days. And no spices, especially pepper. I hate chefs who use spices to cover up their poor skills. As for wine, use a red wine from Rizelle…"

"Just eat what you're given without being picky."

Ellen said exactly what I was thinking.

Of course, Charlotte's face turned red upon hearing that.

"What? Picky? Did you just call me picky?"

"By 'picky,' I meant 'fussy about your looks.' You're pretty, so you're fussy enough to demand a pretty dish."

"Uh… What? What did you say?"

"If you don't understand, just eat what you're given."

"Hey! Where are you going?"

"I'm not running away; I'm going to the kitchen."

Ellen, tired of Charlotte's nagging, entered the kitchen, and Charlotte started watching her from behind, apparently wanting to keep an eye on her.

Harriet and I stood there with our mouths agape, watching Ellen and Charlotte's argument.

"Hey… You know what…"

"I think I know what you're trying to say."

"Last year, it felt like you and I were like that…"

Though the context was different, the flustered Charlotte and the still-fighting Ellen

were the spitting image of Harriet and me last year.

That wasn't the only similarity.

"I don't like carrots!"

"Eat it."

"Ugh, seriously? You won't let me off?"

"I have a knife, you know."

"Wow… You really don't hold back, do you?"

"Reinhardt… I'm feeling dizzy…"

Listening to the bickering of Ellen and Charlotte, Harriet slumped onto the table, groaning in discomfort.

"Truth be told… I'm still not used to this either."

In a way unrelated to their social statuses, the conversation between the two was quite nauseating.

Ellen had prepared beef bourguignon and presented it before us, while Charlotte snickered with her arms crossed.

"Sorry, but do you remember me saying I'm on a diet? What do you think I'd eat after eleven at night? Think a bit, would you?"

Right.

That's just like you.

As Charlotte snorted and turned away from the prepared food, Ellen stared at her intently.

That look.

It's like her lips are about to burst out.

“…Well, if you're not going to eat…”

Seeing Ellen's gradually protruding lips and gaze, Charlotte tried her best to ignore it and muttered quietly.

"…”

As if to say, if you don't eat, I won't either, Ellen stared back at Charlotte with her lips pouting.

She'd be hurt.

She'd be really hurt if she didn't eat.

It was an almost coercive gaze.

"Fine, I get it! I'll eat, okay?!"

Charlotte seemed genuinely uninterested in eating, but she reluctantly ate because of Ellen.

“…Hmph, it's decent enough to eat."

The line was so cliché it was appalling, and Harriet blushed, watching Charlotte, wondering if she had been like that.

"I… I… I'll never… I'll never say that again… Like hmph or… hmph or…”

Right.

You're cute enough without resorting to those lines.

—---

Since Ellen had become Charlotte's knight, there were times like these, and although Harriet hadn't exactly made peace with her, the four of us gathered in the A-class dormitory due to Harriet's ambiguous misunderstanding.

After eating the meal Ellen had prepared, we had some time for tea.

Left to their own devices, Ellen and Charlotte would naturally bicker. Harriet tried her best not to listen, pinching her earlobes when the two began to argue.

Of course, that wasn't all they talked about.

“…Did I hear something wrong just now?"

"It's about the increased efficiency of the Gate usage."

"No, I mean… if we're within the Warp Gate zone, we can travel in just one go?"

"I don't know if it's actually possible, but theoretically, it is. I don't know if you'll understand, but I've even created something like a blueprint."

Charlotte asked Harriet if she had found anything useful while looking through research materials at the Magic Department, and Harriet was merely answering that question.

I was also surprised by the conversation.

Improving the Warp Gate to reach the destination with a single use, rather than consecutive uses.

Of course, it wasn't an immediate matter. Charlotte looked at Harriet with a doubtful expression.

"If what you're saying is true and it really works like that… Wow, I can't even imagine how much things would change."

Charlotte seemed to struggle with calculating the frequency that would be brought about by the simplification and optimization of the warp gate.

Ellen tilted her head quizzically, and I couldn't help but think that our blockhead was still the best.

Come to think of it, Harriet's discovery also had an impact on par with that of power cartridges or Moonshine. It was a change beyond my expectations, so I couldn't quite grasp it.

Since it was a discovery that would greatly benefit the national interest, it seemed

that Charlotte finally began to seriously consider the talent of Harriet de Saint Owan, the greatest genius in magical history.

Ellen, Harriet, and Charlotte.

The sight of the three of them talking together was unusual, but it didn't look too bad.

"What's that sister up to these days?"

As they chatted, with an air of both familiarity and awkwardness, Ellen quietly asked me. Charlotte and Harriet also glanced in my direction, seemingly interested.

It wasn't wrong for her to ask me about Olivia's recent activities.

But it was somehow intriguing that Ellen was curious about it.

Perhaps she had started to feel a sense of kinship, as they were both burdened with the same fate as artifact holders.

Olivia hadn't told me anything about what she was going through, as if it were something she'd rather not talk about.

In fact, it had been difficult even to run into her, as she was frequently away from the temple.

"I heard she's working as an Inquisitor… but I don't know the details."

All I knew was that Olivia was searching for clues about the Demon God Cult.

If I were to reveal myself as the Demon King, Olivia would stand by my side and keep my secret.

However, making that choice would be tantamount to her willingly becoming an enemy of humanity.

I'd rather have Olivia not be on anyone's side. No, it would be better if she considered the Demon King an enemy. That way, she wouldn't end up becoming a faceless enemy to countless others.

It's better for Olivia to regard the nonexistent Demon King as an enemy than to make her an enemy of humanity by joining the Demon King's side. That's because all I have to do is avoid Olivia.

"Inquisitor?"

The word itself carried an ominous resonance, so everyone seemed surprised.

While the second-year Royal Class students saw Olivia as a senior with a volatile personality, they weren't unaware that she was known as a saintly figure.

That's why they were all taken aback to learn that Olivia was involved in the gruesome work of an Inquisitor, capturing and torturing people.

The engagement and the many changes that followed had transformed the political landscape of the continent, as well as our relationships.

Among the smallest of changes, we now found ourselves gathered like this in the middle of the night, talking.

We hadn't completely fallen apart.

But in this strange relationship that felt both awkwardly broken and awkwardly mended,

I could feel a precarious, small sense of peace.

Chapter 411

-Whoosh!

A dark space echoed with the sound of air tearing apart, resonating from all directions.

The moment a whip was swung, it broke the sound barrier, producing a deafening sonic boom. The sound itself was menacing, but those who were struck by the whip endured an even greater threat to their lives.

Those who were hit by the whip, which tore flesh apart, could not even scream if the pain was too severe.

A person slumped, exhausted after torture.

Looking at the state of people who could not be identified as alive or dead, Olivia saw that several of them, trapped behind iron bars, had already stopped breathing.

"Over here."

Olivia was led by someone wearing the Inquisitor's uniform, heading somewhere.

The underground of the Holy Knights' headquarters.

There were more people than usual in the enormous interrogation room.

Olivia had been there a few times before, and she had even been on the verge of being thrown into this place by her foster father.

But now, Olivia was present in her capacity as a special Inquisitor.

"What have they all been arrested for?"

In response to Olivia's question, one of the inquisitors leading the way clicked his tongue.

"In these suspicious times, not only the Demon God Cult but also strange folk magic and idol worship are occurring everywhere. Cases where people believe in legends passed down in various regions or those who worship heretical cults that are unheard of and unrelated to Demons…"

"Are there followers who believe in Ragan Artorius, the Heroic Faith?"

"They're the biggest headache. They're definitely heretics, but…"

"A difficult issue to handle, I see."

"Yes, we can't intervene yet, not until a conclusion is reached after a papal conference. It's a situation where we cannot act."

Amidst the spread of anxiety and fear, not only the Heroic Faith and Demon God Cult, but numerous folk beliefs were also emerging.

Among them, the Heroic Faith was the largest heresy, which required swift action; however, mishandling it could result in a large-scale massacre of civilians.

If that happened, not only would they have to consider a clash with the empire, but the people might also turn their backs on the Five Great Divine Churches.

Ragan Artorius' name carried immense weight. It was said that he had saved humanity and ascended to sit by the side of the gods. Even if that was not true, who would dare to boldly claim otherwise?

In the current situation, a single misstep could lead to the Divine Church being seen as humanity's enemy, resulting in a farcical turn of events.

That's why, while minor heresies were captured and brought to this interrogation room to demand repentance and extract information about other heretics, the Heroic Faith followers who could be seen on the streets remained untouched.

Olivia found the situation amusing.

Following the outbreak of the Demon War, the Holy Knights, representing the entire Divine Church, had united to form a powerful organization.

It turned out to be quite effective. Although they had always had a symbiotic

relationship, the creation of an institution representing their collective will had led to a fivefold increase, or even more, in the influence, power, and authority of the united believers.

Even the commander of the Holy Knights had come to possess power and influence on par with the pontiffs of the five major theocratic orders.

Originally created with the purpose of defeating the Demon King, the Holy Knights now remained in existence despite the disappearance of the Demon King.

Thus, the former commander of the Holy Knights, Riverrier Lanze, had even devised a plan to establish a Holy Empire.

However, the situation was turned upside down due to the reappearance of the Demon King.

It wasn't that the Demon King had done anything directly.

People driven mad by the fear of the Demon King created a fictitious faith called the Hero's Religion, which now posed a threat to the five major religions.

Far from launching a Holy Empire, the five major religions now had to worry about their existence being threatened by the Hero's Religion, a faith without substance.

Ironically, the prestige of the Hero's Religion grew even larger due to the existence of Ellen Artorius and the new owner of Alsebringer, Reinhardt.

Hadn't it been said?

That the hero would return.

That the reincarnated hero Reinhardt, and Ellen Artorius, a descendant of the hero, would save us.

Since religion tends to conform faith to reality, those who believe in the Hero's Religion will propagate the emergence of these two as the fulfillment of the prophecies taught by the Hero's Religion. The influence of the Hero's Religion will expand.

It has no doctrine, no hierarchy, no diocese, no temples, no pontiffs.

An epidemic named the Hero's Religion, like a wildfire, will engulf the continent.

The five major religions.

They might meet their end at the hands of the masses, not the Demon King.

Did the Demon King foresee this situation when he attacked Riverrier Lanze?

If he knew that this would happen and killed Riverrier Lanze, then the Demon King would be something more than just a genius.

Because he even took into account human madness and fear.

In that case, after killing Riverrier Lanze, he may have sensed the signs of the Hero's Religion and attacked Rajeurn to amplify it.

The fuse ignited by the assassination of Riverrier Lanze.

The explosive that was the first Rajeurn raid.

With the recent raid on the Holy Knights, it all exploded.

The Hero's Religion's revival has been forced upon the five major religions through a few guerrilla battles.

Could the Demon King have really known this would happen?

Olivia couldn't know that far.

However, Olivia decided to do what she had to do.

It was okay if she wasn't chosen.

It was fine as long as she could see a smile.

It was good if there was happiness.

She would protect Reinhardt.

If she had to become a monster to do so, she was prepared to be one.

"This is the place."

Unlike other areas, there were no iron bars allowing a clear view inside.

A massive cell, blocked by a thick stone wall.

Numerous magic circles and protective wards on the outside prevented interference from the outside and escape from the inside.

It was a cell designed to imprison important figures among the heretics.

-Kurliung!

As the interrogator manipulated something, the stone wall opened, revealing the cell.

A battered heretic, head bowed, lay unconscious in the cell.

"It's not a fake, is it?"

In the provinces, people were already attempting to hang those who weren't followers of the Demon God Cult, and Olivia had seen instances where actual priests had cooperated in creating unjust victims. This question was extremely important to her, as it was not her place to interrogate innocent people.

"I'm certain. This is a priest who can wield the divine power of the demon, not a mere impostor among the townsfolk. However, they refuse to speak. It seems they have received some special training, as befitting a priest."

From what Olivia could see, it was clear that the usual methods of torture hadn't been employed, given the traces of it on the prisoner. It seemed that the prisoner possessed a strong resistance not only to anti-magic but also to mental spells.

"Alright. Everyone, leave."

"Excuse me? They're dangerous. Leaving just the two of you alone…"

"Do I have to tell you twice?"

As Olivia silently stared at the escorts, they swallowed nervously.

Her expression, though mild, seemed to hide a chilling sharpness like that of a blade.

She was already renowned as a Saint of Eredian, and despite her sudden abandonment of her faith, she was an apostle of Tu'an who had returned with the Tiamata. To oppose her will was considered akin to going against the will of the divine. Even the Pope and the Grandmaster of the Holy Knights couldn't easily confront a champion chosen by the sacred relics.

"Yes, if it becomes dangerous…"

"I know, so just leave."

At Olivia's terse command, the stone door closed, and darkness filled the chamber.

-Hwoong

With a wave of her hand, Olivia conjured light to illuminate the stone chamber.

The torture of a heretic inquisitor was not something ordinary people could endure.

The torture of priests stemmed not from the pain itself but from their ability to harness the power of healing.

Even if they felt as if they would lose their minds, even if their limbs seemed severed, even if they were on the verge of hemorrhagic shock, priests could restore their bodies to their original state and begin the torture anew.

Thus, most victims would eventually confess the truth, or at least say what the inquisitors wanted to hear, even if it was a lie.

However, this priest of the Demon God Cult had yet to break.

Olivia dragged a chair over to the side of the unresponsive, limp prisoner and sat down quietly.

"If you're conscious, why don't you lift your head?"

"…"

There was no response from the prisoner.

"I have neither the talent nor the skill for torture. If a stone-thrower like me were to torture you, you might even die."

At Olivia's casual yet brutal words, a hoarse voice emerged from the prisoner with their head bowed.

"Kill me…"

It was a simple response.

Death was not a freedom granted here. Taking one's own life was incredibly difficult, and in a bound state, even more so. Even if they tried to die, the priests would forcibly heal them.

Torture that didn't even permit death.

That was the true heretical inquisition, unlike the botched trials that took place in Rajeurn.

"How easily you speak of death after enduring such terrible torture. How pitiful."

Olivia gazed quietly at the heretic with their head bowed.

"Still, I am different from the inquisitors who have come before me."

In the Light

Olivia extended her right hand towards the heretic, who bowed his head.

Shooooooo

"I know how to wield the power of the demon. Quite well, in fact."

From Olivia's right hand, a dark and dense energy flowed, distinct from the white light filling the room.

"We are on the same side."

The heretic, lifting his head, looked at Olivia as if he couldn't believe it.

The power of the demon and the power of the gods have the same origin.

Olivia was saddened by the countless conflicts, pain, and death that occurred because people did not know this or did not want to acknowledge it.

Olivia would use this knowledge.

Olivia was both a priestess of Tu’an and a priestess of Kier.

Therefore, she could easily open the door that would never open unless one was an ally.

"Are you willing to talk now?"

Olivia, who had illuminated the room with the power of purity, stared intently at the heretic, who was draped in the power of corruption.

"Oh… my lord…”

To the heretic, it must have appeared as the form of a god.

—---

Late at night, after enjoying a small feast with three others at midnight, Harriet returned to her room, washed, dried her hair, and sat on the bed.

She had realized that she couldn't hate Reinhardt more than she liked him, so Harriet had clung to him recklessly.

Was that okay?

While it was true that she couldn't hate Reinhardt, Harriet also felt that she would ultimately be in the last place.

She knew that her heart, relationships, and connections with others were deeper, and she had to circle around them.

How long should she endure the misery of squeezing in between them?

For now, talking to Reinhardt, eating together, and sharing stories was enjoyable. It

was so delightful, comfortable, and happy that she didn't even feel the swamp of depression that engulfed her when she was alone.

But when she returned to her dorm room like this, she discovered her own pitiful self again.

Was this right?

Was it right to accumulate her current feelings, enjoying the moment, finding comfort and happiness, only to suffer greater pain later?

Perhaps it would be better to hurt now.

Maybe it would be better to hurt a lot now.

Then, it wouldn't hurt later.

If she endured this pain now, it would eventually turn into a scar.

Once it became a scar, it wouldn't hurt anymore, at least.

Wasn't that the right thing to do?

But tomorrow, Reinhardt would calmly strike up a conversation, as he always had.

Telling Reinhardt to stop pretending to be friendly while giving him a cold look would be a ridiculous act.

Most of all.

She didn't know the specifics, but Reinhardt had a deep relationship with Charlotte. It seemed that Reinhardt had even saved Charlotte's life when she was in danger.

Ellen and Reinhardt had risked their lives together, fighting in the Darklands. And, in truth, Ellen and Reinhardt had spent the most time together.

In Olivia's case, Reinhardt had cleverly rescued her from her confinement and threats by her stepfather. In a way, he had saved her life.

Reinhardt had at least one significant event with everyone else, excluding herself.

But what about her?

'Something seems too trivial. No matter how much I think about it… '

Even in her own thoughts.

She felt wronged and frustrated by constantly being pushed aside.

Upon serious consideration, she was objectively insignificant.

"…"

Of course, going through hardships wasn't a good thing. However, it seemed oddly different that Harriet hadn't experienced such events.

The Archduchess of Saint-Owan, Harriet de Saint-Owan, was insignificant.

Now it was impossible to say that she, an archduchess, was on the same level as mere commoners. After all, Reinhardt was the undisputed champion of Als.

What about today, even?

In reality, nothing had happened, but she had almost collapsed in front of Reinhardt as if she had been stalked, and remembering her trembling made her feel so embarrassed she wanted to die.

It wasn't as if they had a tremendous fight and then had a grand, tearful reconciliation.

This situation had just happened without any proper conversation.

Harriet couldn't believe that she had ended up having something like a reconciliation with Reinhardt just because she was scared of something so trivial.

Wasn't even the event of their relationship returning to normal too insignificant?

The next morning at dawn.

"Archduchess of Saint-Owan, we need your cooperation for a moment."

It wasn't until two magicians, who introduced themselves as investigators from the Royal Magic Department, knocked on her door at dawn.

She had definitely thought that way.

Seeing the two men who claimed to be investigators from the Royal Magic Department and had come all the way to the dormitory, Harriet had no choice but to be taken aback.

They couldn't be fake. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to enter the temple in the first place.

"Me… why?"

"Last night, a murder occurred in the Royal Magic Department's research archive. You need to be investigated as an important witness in connection with the case."

"Yes… What?!"

A murder.

At that word, Harriet felt her head spinning, and at the same time, she was engulfed in an inexplicable fear.

Even if one had done nothing wrong, even if it was the highborn Archduchess of Saint-Owan, hearing the word "crime" made her freeze.

Moreover, it was a murder that took place within the royal palace.

Harriet turned pale as she looked at the courteous but imposing investigators.

It was dawn, so her classmates would be asleep. However, it was also the time for those who had morning training to wake up.

“…Uh, what's going on?"

For example, someone like Reinhardt.

Chapter 412

As I stepped out of my room for my dawn training, I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether or not I should strike up a conversation with the person I saw.

However, it was clear that the two outsiders had brought with them a serious issue.

Upon hearing the words "murder case," I acted more quickly than I had anticipated.

"We need to investigate a key witness for a murder case that occurred in the Royal Magic Department. We've already secured the cooperation of the Temple."

Harriet looked back and forth between me and the investigators.

There was no way Harriet could have committed such a crime as murder.

"May I accompany you?"

It was clear that Harriet had been caught up in something quite unusual.

—---

The Magic Department investigators seemed to know who I was.

Despite the importance of the case, they allowed me to act as Harriet's guardian when I volunteered to do so.

Fortunately, the investigation took place not outside the Temple but inside the Royal Class dormitory, in one of the empty guardrooms.

Harriet wore an expression of complete ignorance as to what had happened, and I, who had suddenly been caught up in the situation, felt the same way.

Harriet had been in the Royal Magic Department late last night.

She had seemed a bit frightened yesterday, but she had said it was just her imagination.

Had something really happened after all?

"What… is going on?"

Harriet asked, her lips trembling slightly, and one of the investigators began to explain slowly.

"Last night, three guards were killed in the Royal Magic Department's research archive, and a magical tome was stolen."

Murder and the theft of a magical tome.

Upon hearing this, Harriet's face turned from pale to an ashen blue.

"At present, the most likely suspect is the 8th research archive librarian, Roswin, who is currently unreachable."

"That… that person?"

"Yes, Roswin, the librarian in charge of the 8th reading room, is the prime suspect."

Roswin.

It was a name I had never heard before.

Harriet was terrified, but she finally seemed to understand and slowly nodded her head.

Harriet began to explain what had happened yesterday.

The prime suspect was Roswin, who was currently missing after committing the crime.

"There wasn't anything particularly strange… I was just looking at some research material on warp gates… Oh, now that I think about it…"

Harriet hesitated for a moment, as if remembering something, and began to speak.

"He mentioned bringing magical tomes from somewhere… Were those the ones that were stolen?"

"Yes, they were."

"He seemed oddly curious about their origin… Even to the point of being suspicious. He was babbling on and on…"

"So, you're saying Roswin was acting differently than usual?"

"Yes… He used to be rather aloof, but would always provide me with whatever I needed… That day, he talked a lot more, and even said it would have been better if we had met earlier… Oh."

Harriet muttered to herself as if she had realized something.

Harriet told the investigators a few more stories, but there were no particularly significant clues.

However, Harriet seemed to be deeply shaken by the events.

The person I had calmly conversed with yesterday had committed a murder and escaped the palace.

"Thank you for your cooperation in the investigation."

The investigators briefly wrapped up their conversation and stood up, seemingly having no further business to attend to.

"Can that person… be caught?"

The investigators neither confirmed nor denied Harriet's fear-laden question.

"We'll have to do our best."

"Well then, we appreciate your cooperation. It was an honor to meet you, Reinhardt."

"Yes? Oh… yes."

Expressing their gratitude to Harriet, they left the duty room with a slightly awkward comment about the honor of meeting me.

An unexpected murder and theft.

"…"

Harriet's fingers were still white, the shock seemingly not having faded yet.

Unable to stand still, I brewed some black tea in the duty room and poured a cup for Harriet.

"Ah, thanks… Reinhardt."

Harriet cautiously sipped the tea with trembling hands. Eventually, she drained the cup and let out a deep breath.

"What on earth happened…"

It was clear that Harriet had experienced something strange yesterday.

"Was it that guy yesterday?"

"Uh-huh…"

The mage who had suddenly stolen a considerable number of magic books. Harriet seemed to calm down a bit, taking a deep breath.

"I don't know why he took them… but there were quite a few."

Was it such a large number that a well-behaved, even elite, mage would lose his mind, kill someone, and flee?

"I thought he was greedy for magic books, but to go as far as killing…"

Harriet didn't know who Roswin was, but he must have been a mage who had been quite helpful to her until now. It was natural to be shocked when she heard that someone she had encountered frequently had killed three people.

Harriet murmured, furrowing her brows.

"I should have… noticed it sooner…"

He had shown a different behavior pattern than usual due to his decision to steal magic books. Harriet thought that if she had caught on to his intentions sooner, this

might not have happened.

"There's no way you could have known that."

"I guess, but…"

Was she blaming herself?

If she had quickly noticed that Roswin was acting differently yesterday, could lives have been spared?

It's impossible to deduce such a thing just because someone is acting strange. Therefore, Harriet's self-blame was meaningless.

Harriet hung her head, fiddling with her teacup.

"If I had just realized that something was off, I might not have been able to do anything, but at least I could have told someone. But I just got scared and ran away…"

Finally, she let out a deep sigh.

"I feel… pathetic."

I didn't think it was Harriet's fault, and she probably didn't think it was her fault either.

However, she regretted her decision to run away yesterday.

The choice to flee without trying to find out how strange the person was.

What should we do?

This wasn't Harriet's fault, but it was difficult to sit idly by while such an incident had occurred.

Above all, a murder case within the palace was a very serious matter.

"……Shall we try to investigate it ourselves?"

"Us……?"

"We might not be able to expect much, but there's no rule saying we can't find anything, right?"

There was no harm in trying.

As a hero, I had the authority to interfere in almost all affairs of the empire, and Harriet had a brilliant mind.

More importantly, I hadn't been able to do anything for Harriet until now, and I wanted to do something for her, who was looking sullen.

Of course, I wasn't sure if pursuing a murder case was really the right thing to do.

And this.

Somehow, if this was the flow……

[Event Occurred - Murder Case Investigation]

[Description: A murder and theft incident has occurred within the palace. Investigate the case.]

[Reward: Achievement points 5,000, ???]

I had a feeling an event would happen, and sure enough, it did.

—---

Saturday morning.

Ellen should have been spending her weekend sparring, but Reinhardt had business to attend to, so he left the dormitory with Harriet.

She didn't know what had happened yesterday, but she found out that Harriet and Reinhardt were getting along like they used to.

She had been worried that Harriet and Reinhardt were drifting apart.

It wasn't quite like the old days, but the sight of Harriet and Reinhardt chatting and heading somewhere together.

Had Harriet finally gotten better?

She felt relieved, but at the same time, she couldn't fully accept it due to a complicated emotion. Ellen watched the two of them leave the temple through the window.

It was good, but she couldn't feel completely happy.

Feeling this way made Ellen feel guilty towards Harriet, but she couldn't do anything about it.

So, rather, when the three of them were together, she would act more friendly towards Harriet than she felt. It made her feel harder to bear, though.

Training couldn't be done without Reinhardt. Since Saviollin Turner left the temple on weekends to take care of Shanafel's duties, her help couldn't be obtained either.

She hoped it wouldn't be a time-consuming task.

Ellen was thinking like that while contemplating how to train alone.

"Hey."

However, Charlotte came to visit the Class A dormitory.

"Let's talk for a bit."

Even if she put it nicely, they couldn't be considered close, but they were bound by an oath of loyalty.

"Okay."

That's why Ellen obediently followed Charlotte.

—---

Charlotte took Ellen outside the dormitory.

Her expression was hardened, as if she had no intention of discussing an easy subject.

"I don't know you well, but I think you're burdened by something. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure."

"I see, so you're at a level where you don't even think about such things while living."

Ellen's lips were sealed so tight, the very concept of loose lips would have never even crossed her mind. Naturally, she was oblivious to gossip, living her life without ever engaging in spreading rumors.

Charlotte took several deep breaths.

She intended to reveal a secret known to very few people to her knight, who was uncharacteristically undignified.

"You know I was kidnapped and held captive in the Demon King's castle before I escaped, right?"

"Yes."

As the threat of the Demon King grew more imminent and his existence could potentially endanger Reinhardt, Charlotte finally made up her mind.

"There was a child who escaped with me back then."

“…Together?"

"Yes."

As Charlotte nodded her head,

"I think that child is the current Demon King."

"!"

A secret among secrets known only to a select few.

Charlotte intended to share this with Ellen.

Very few people knew about Charlotte's escape from the Demon King's castle. Among the Temple students, only Charlotte, Bertus, and Reinhardt knew the full story.

So it was only natural for Ellen to be shocked by Charlotte's confession.

Charlotte explained the entire process of her escape from the Demon King's castle, from start to finish.

She recounted how Bertus's agents tried to kill her and how the child who brought the teleportation scroll along with Dyrus had saved her.

Of course, Ellen had no idea that there was a child who had escaped with Charlotte, let alone that the child was now the Demon King who was shaking the entire continent, so she was understandably shocked.

"I didn't know at the time, of course. He must have been using some kind of disguise magic. This isn't the important part, though. Ultimately, I'm almost certain that he’s the Demon King now."

Charlotte bit her lip.

She had decided to tell everything, but she seemed to be wondering whether she should really reveal this as well.

After contemplating, Charlotte looked around.

In the park in front of the Royal Class dormitory, it was early morning on the weekend, so there were no passersby.

"Since you're going to keep being my knight, you need to know this. I'll tell you."

"Okay."

"You know I have Supernatural abilities, right?"

At Charlotte's words, Ellen nodded her head. However, Reinhardt knew that Charlotte was grappling with some serious issues. She had experienced something like aftereffects after returning from the Demon King's castle, but that was all he knew.

Ellen did not know what Charlotte's Supernatural power was.

Charlotte held out her right hand quietly.

-Swoosh-

Seeing the dark, boiling darkness emanating from Charlotte's right hand, Ellen felt her breath catch.

It was a sinister power that gave off an ominous feeling just by looking at it, even though she didn't know what it was.

"My body harbors the soul of the Demon King."

“…What?"

The following words could only make Ellen more astounded.

"When I was trapped in the Demon King's castle, he did something to me. I didn't know the meaning back then, but now I do. The Demon King, in preparation for any unforeseen circumstances, implanted a part of his soul in my body for the purpose of resurrection."

Even the usually indifferent Ellen found it difficult to hide her astonishment at the words coming out of Charlotte's mouth.

She had escaped the Demon Realm with the heir of the demon realm and even had a part of the Demon King's soul slumbering within her own body.

The words that poured out far surpassed Ellen's imagination, which had pictured an incurable disease.

"Turns out, the current Demon King, the child who had escaped back then, didn't save me for my sake, but to preserve the Demon King's soul within me."

"I didn't even know that, and while I had some suspicion that the child might be a demon, I intentionally pretended not to know. I even went so far as to turn a blind eye to how I could find the child."

"I admit, I was foolish and weak. I wanted to believe that the child's intentions were

for my sake. But I don't believe that anymore. And now that I'm in this state, Reinhardt has saved me numerous times, and the Demon King might even be targeting Reinhardt."

Charlotte took a deep breath after finishing her words.

"I'm not sure if the Demon King is really behind all this, but the Demon God cultists are showing up too. So, I'm going to retrace the clues I had intentionally ignored and overlooked. And since the Demon King's story isn't unrelated to you, and you are my knight, I'm going to tell you all the secrets."

Just as Ellen had decided to protect Charlotte regardless of personal feelings, Charlotte acknowledged Ellen as her knight, also regardless of personal feelings.

"I don't want to burden Reinhardt anymore. He will try to handle everything himself. I've been helped several times, but now I want to avoid such situations. So, if you're okay with it, I'd like to pursue the Demon King together. I can't use anyone else. It's a matter related to my sensitive secret, so I have to investigate it myself. Of course, the likelihood of finding the Demon King's whereabouts isn't high. But doing something is better than doing nothing. I want to try something now."

Charlotte looked intently at Ellen.

"Will you do it with me?"

Investigating the clues about the Demon King.

In regret, Charlotte tried to reconnect the link she had severed with her own hands.

Now that the existence of the Demon King was beginning to threaten the entire continent, Charlotte realized she had to do something.

If this mess had continued due to her own foolishness, she vowed to do something in order to fulfill her minimum duty as a member of the royal family.

The clues were already lost, but it was possible that something could be gained through them.

"Yes. Let's do it."

At Charlotte's proposal, Ellen silently nodded her head.

If it could reach the Demon King, it would be an act to protect Reinhardt.

There was no reason for Ellen to refuse.

Chapter 413

Ellen and Charlotte left the temple.

Charlotte had an artifact that cast a spell to hinder recognition, while Ellen wore a robe as a disguise. They were prepared in case they attracted unwanted attention.

As they walked down the street, Charlotte briefly explained to Ellen where they were going. She recounted how she had found a clue while exploring the shopping district of the Aligar district with Reinhardt, how Reinhardt had played the role of a messenger and delivered a letter to the shopkeeper, and how they had ceased contact after the evidence became conclusive.

And finally, how she had told him to leave the empire.

Upon recalling all this, Charlotte realized anew just how much she had contributed to the growth of this massive problem. If only she had pursued that magician relentlessly and captured the child.

If only she had killed the Demon King.

None of this would be happening now.

Charlotte came to a sudden realization that she was a sinner not only to the empire but to all mankind and the entire era.

She had been nurturing a cancerous growth that threatened the empire, all because she had been swayed by worthless approval, faith, and attachment.

If it weren't for Reinhardt, she might have awakened as a Demon King herself, causing yet another bloodbath.

Overwhelmed with guilt, Charlotte spoke in a barely audible voice, “…You probably can't understand me, can you?"

"I don't understand your actions, but I don't know what you've been through either."

Ellen didn't say whether Charlotte's actions were right or wrong.

She didn't know how much pain Charlotte had suffered or how terrible she had felt in the Demon King's castle.

However, the boy who had saved her from the wretched life of a prisoner, just as death was upon her.

At that time, there would have been no room for doubt.

Ellen didn't think it was possible to doubt someone who had risked their life to save you in such a situation.

Of course, it was a fact that Charlotte's actions had caused them to miss the opportunity to capture the Demon King.

The boy who had saved her life.

She had tried to trust him until the end, but eventually learned the truth that she had merely been used.

Ellen knew that Charlotte's heart must be in a lot of pain.

Ellen didn't know how to comfort someone.

However, it was true that Charlotte's choices had a very negative impact on the continent and the empire.

"Blaming yourself is pointless."

It was not comfort, but an attempt to offer solace.

That was all Ellen could say.

“…You're right."

For now, all they could do was hope to find even the smallest clue.

—---

Even if the existence of the Demon King stirred the world, everyday life continued.

The relentless solicitation in the Aligar shopping district was just another part of life that went on, unrelated to the Demon King.

In fact, due to the appearance of the Demon King, protective items were being aggressively sold.

Seeing the adventurers just starting their journey, Ellen felt a sense of novelty.

Although she wasn't genuinely interested in being an adventurer, Ellen had seen the true face of adventurers in the Darklands with Reinhardt.

Adventurers continued to emerge even as the Demon King threatened the continent at this very moment.

Charlotte, passing by the scene, spoke to Ellen.

"They say a labyrinth, presumed to be the Tomb of the Lich, has been discovered in Darkland."

"A Lich?"

"Yeah."

At the sudden mention of a Lich, Ellen cocked her head.

"It's not completely cleared, but there are adventurers who've wandered around and brought back a few magical tomes. I don't know much, but the level of these tomes seems quite significant. That's why it's quite a commotion."

"Really?"

"If the discovery of the labyrinth, which hasn't even been fully explored, is that significant, I wonder what could be inside."

It was only natural to think that if the magical tomes, which were mere byproducts of the labyrinth, caused such a stir, there would be even greater magical tomes or artifacts inside.

Charlotte, walking quietly, suddenly clicked her tongue.

"Tsk, I hope yesterday's incident wasn't related to the Demon King."

"Yesterday?"

“…There was a murder inside the royal palace. I only received the report this morning."

At the mention of murder, Ellen furrowed her brow.

"In the royal palace…?"

"Yeah, a member of the magic department killed the guards, stole some magic tomes, and fled. It would be one thing if it were a simple theft for profit… But it's not related to the Demon King, is it?"

Charlotte had been with Ellen to track down the traces of the Demon King, but the royal family must have been in turmoil.

"I wonder if Harriet was questioned too…”

Only then did Ellen seem to understand the significance of the serious conversation between Harriet and Reinhardt earlier today.

Harriet must have been questioned about the incident that happened last night, and the two were planning something because of it.

What were Reinhardt and Harriet doing right now, and where?

It would be nice if they weren't getting involved in something dangerous.

That's what Ellen thought.

"Were the stolen magical tomes… important?"

"That's the biggest problem right now."

Charlotte said, furrowing her brow.

"The fact that we don't know the content of the stolen magical tomes."

“…What?"

For a moment, Ellen couldn't understand what Charlotte was saying.

"What do you mean? How can we not know what was stolen?"

"They had arrived at the palace less than a day ago, and they disappeared before we could fully understand their content."

Thus, they couldn't determine how dangerous the magical tomes were.

"Well, I should tell you this too."

Charlotte intended to tell Ellen everything about herself. Only by knowing all the secrets could a knight properly fulfill their role.

"Those magic tomes, I brought them from the underground of the Demon King's castle yesterday."

—---

Harriet and I left the temple and headed towards the royal palace. We didn't know what we could do, but it was natural to go to the scene to find out about the incident.

I wore a hood, as my face might be recognized, and Harriet did the same, wearing a hood like me. I don't know why she copied me.

Roswin.

Why had he stolen the magical tomes and fled?

"Obviously, they must be valuable, right?"

"Valuable, and possibly much more than that."

Upon hearing my words, Harriet nodded her head.

"Obtaining the qualifications to own a magic tome is extremely difficult. Most mages

either access or borrow officially issued magic tomes from large institutions, schools, associations, or guilds. And without the proper qualifications, you can't even view magic tomes exceeding a certain rank or level of danger."

Just as enchantment magic is strictly managed, there is a stringent system in place for the management of magic tomes.

"Though it's understandable that widely available magic tomes are heavily regulated, having money doesn't necessarily make it easy to acquire them."

"So, they're not easy to sell either, then?"

Harriet stared at me intently upon hearing my words.

"Exactly."

“...It's difficult to buy, but easy to sell?"

"There are countless wizards who would want to possess a rare magic tome all to themselves. As long as they don't get caught, it's not a problem, right? They'd likely be willing to pay a hefty sum for rare magic, wouldn't they? Especially if it's a very rare magic that has not yet been revealed to the world. Its value would come from the possibility that it contains new methods of using magic or theories, rather than its effectiveness."

A rare magic tome is indeed a very expensive item, provided it is truly rare. It may be challenging to officially possess dangerous magic, but secretly owning it is another story.

Anyway, the point is that magic tomes can be quite valuable, particularly if they are rare.

"It wasn't about the money, though. Definitely not."

"But you just said magic tomes are valuable?"

Harriet looked at me with a subtle curl of her lips.

What's with this condescending feeling?

"If they were a magician capable of working in the royal magic department's research lab, they could make a fortune selling copies. There would be no need to steal it."

“…Right, that makes sense."

It was an obvious point when I thought about it.

"So, the reason why Roswin stole the magic tomes wasn't about money."

Listening to Harriet, her words seemed to make sense.

There were countless safe ways to make money if that was the motive, so why would someone resort to murder within the royal palace and steal magic tomes?

"It is strange. He must have received considerable treatment and status in the empire, and his identity would have been verified thoroughly…”

Only those with proven skills and trustworthiness would be able to work in the royal magic department's archives. Yet, someone with such credentials murdered someone and stole magic tomes for an unknown reason.

If it wasn't about money, what was the reason?

Was it the magic itself?

Cantus Magna.

I couldn't help but think of that group.

Could it be that Roswin was a member of Cantus Magna?

"Do you know what the stolen magic tomes were about?"

"I don't know much about it. And it seemed like Roswin didn't know either. But recently, a lich's tomb was discovered in Darkland. It was said that they might have been taken from there… Oh, right, he seemed curious about the origins of the magic tomes."

The lich's tomb.

A trap set up to lure out Cantus Magna.

The leaked grimoire had made its way to the royal palace, and it was Roswin who stole it?

According to Harriet, Roswin was curious about the origin of the grimoire.

That meant…

If he was indeed Cantus Magna, it meant that information about the labyrinth of Darkland could fall into their hands.

It meant that Cantus Magna might gain access to the labyrinth.

Had Harriet been caught up in something strange, or was it actually a task I had to undertake?

It's not certain yet. However, if the Roswin incident has even the slightest connection to Cantus Magna, I have to investigate this matter regardless of Harriet's will.

—---

My face is not yet at a level where it serves as my calling card. Of course, I don't wish for that either. My sanity would be stretched thin just from dealing with matters at the temple, let alone being recognized everywhere on the continent.

Of course, my qualifications to enter the royal palace were substituted by my crest, and since Harriet frequently visited the palace, we could easily enter.

However, there were many who restricted access to the palace.

-The royal palace is currently on lockdown.

It was natural for the entire palace to be on high alert since a disturbance had occurred within the palace. Aside from a very few exceptions, most of the nobles and bureaucrats who had business at the palace were being denied access.

The atmosphere inside the palace was just as tense.

The incident took place in the magic department, which was located in the southern

region of the palace. It seemed that the security measures throughout the palace had been strengthened, with soldiers and knights busily coming and going.

"Of course… it's not an ordinary incident…"

Upon arriving at the scene, Harriet's voice trembled slightly as if overwhelmed.

Even a simple murder case would be a problem, but this was a murder that had occurred within the royal palace. Although Harriet wasn't a witness, she had just talked with the culprit yesterday.

It seemed that she was just now realizing the gravity of the situation, as she unconsciously grabbed the edge of my sleeve.

"Don't worry. In this situation, there's no way anything else could happen. Let's go to the scene."

"Uh, umm…"

Harriet and I took the tram that operated within the royal palace and headed towards the location of the magic department.

Based on the central palace Tetra, to the north was the spring palace where Charlotte lived, to the east was the summer palace where the royal family members resided, the south housed the various departments in charge of the empire's main duties, and to the west was the winter palace where Bertus lived.

Our destination was to the south, not far away.

The southern area of the royal palace, where the departments handling the empire's main duties were located, was filled with massive buildings, and the magic department building, boasting an imposing scale, was one of them.

The huge marble structure was both massive and elegant.

However, the area was now surrounded by countless soldiers, and the entrance was blocked by the royal guards.

The atmosphere in the already serious royal palace was even more tense around the magic department.

“…Should we really get involved in this?"

Harriet spoke hesitantly, as if she believed this was not a matter to be taken lightly.

"Why be afraid? We're not necessarily going to do anything; we're just trying to gather information."

At my words, Harriet stared blankly at me for a moment before sighing deeply with a defeated expression.

"I'm sorry to say this, but… why are you so fearless?"

Harriet wondered why I wasn't scared at all, despite the fact that even I, a great princess, felt intimidated by the many soldiers. I didn't have a good answer.

Why indeed?

I wasn't even someone who was used to this kind of thing.

Perhaps, due to constantly maintaining a delinquent persona and now being treated as a hero, I had become nonchalant about such matters?

Comparing myself to when I first fell into this world, I had changed quite a bit.

"What can I do? I was born this way."

"You're incredible," Harriet said cautiously as she followed me.

Naturally, the Magic Department, being the epicenter of the incident, was off-limits for the time being.

"Access to this area is currently restricted."

"I'm aware, but I'm…”

"Reinhardt? Saint Owan…?"

Just as I was about to explain, a familiar voice called out to me from behind.

It was a voice I had grown quite accustomed to.

"What's happening here?"

Bertus had just arrived at the Magic Department, leading a group of people.

Chapter 414

Bertus, a member of the royal family, had come to investigate an incident that had occurred within the palace. We ran into him at the entrance.

Fortunately, without needing much explanation, Harriet and I were able to enter the sealed magic department building with Bertus.

"You want to investigate?"

"Yeah. I want to try and help in any way I can."

At my words, Bertus tilted his head. It seemed he didn't quite understand why I was insisting on getting involved in this case. However, he glanced at Harriet standing beside me and nodded.

"I heard that Saint Owan was conducting research in the magic department. Could it be…?"

"Yes… The culprit was the librarian in charge of the reading room where I used to visit."

"Is that so?"

Bertus nodded as if he hadn't known that fact. He furrowed his brow and sighed.

"It must have been a shock. Were you close to the culprit, or…?"

"No, not exactly close… We just had a conversation yesterday… It seemed a bit strange yesterday. I've already informed the royal magic department about it."

"Alright, I'll get the information from them."

Bertus crossed his arms and surveyed the magic department.

"Having more brains to think about it can't hurt. Let's go together, for now."

Bertus didn't seem to believe we would find anything useful, but he allowed us to join the investigation.

—---

It seemed that Bertus had come to the magic department only after it was clear that the area had been secured following the incident.

I wondered if Charlotte, who had stayed at the dormitory yesterday, was aware of what had happened.

Together with the attendants Bertus had brought, we headed to the magic department's research archive, where the incident had taken place.

"I don't mind, and Reinhardt should be fine as well. What about you?"

"Me? What do you mean…?"

"Seeing the corpse."

As the crime scene was preserved, he was asking if we could handle seeing a gruesome sight from now on.

"Ah, um… Yeah, I'll be fine."

Harriet seemed slightly taken aback but nodded as if she could endure it.

Harriet may not have had a strong resistance to such things, but she had seen a chimera at Aaron Mede's mansion before. Moreover, she had seen the countless chimeras' remains that Ellen had cut apart.

Even if she didn't have resistance, witnessing a horrifying scene wasn't entirely new to her.

"Alright, let's go then."

We moved towards the magic department's research archive.

An attendant briefed us on the incident, making sure Bertus and we could hear.

"The estimated time of the incident is around 2 a.m. last night. The suspect, Roswin, is believed to have killed three on-duty personnel - Aryelka, Sadman von Grinthes, and Rinea Wenson - who were working on classifying and reading newly arrived magic books, and fled with the books."

The research archive was located deep underground in the magic department. The locks were currently disengaged, but it was clear that it wasn't a place anyone could enter casually.

At present, it is estimated that Roswin hid in the research archive room without leaving work and committed the crime targeting the early hours when only the guards were left.

The summary of the incident is that he waited for the number of people in the research archive room to be minimized, killed the magicians on guard duty, and then stole the magic tomes before escaping.

"How on earth did he manage to get through this security?"

“…For now, we don't know."

At Bertus's words, the attendant nodded.

The security was still enhanced, but the magic department's research archive room must have been thoroughly prepared for problems, including theft.

Of course, there was something similar to a search station like the Temple Gate, and there must have been guards stationed as well.

Not understanding, Bertus gave an additional explanation to Harriet and me.

"Roswin is the only suspect because he is the only one without a record of leaving work. And although he committed the crime, there is no one who saw him leave the magic department building, nor any record of it. Of course, there is no record of leaving the palace either."

“…What?"

"So, Roswin might still be somewhere in the palace, or even hiding somewhere in the magic department building."

At those words, both Harriet and I swallowed hard.

"It's not like any crude disguise magic or invisibility was used. We have all the countermeasures in place for that. So the problem is, we don't know if Roswin is still in the palace or how he escaped if he did."

This incident could be more dangerous than Harriet and I had thought.

"Haha, why are you so scared?"

Seeing Harriet and me looking a bit intimidated, Bertus laughed.

"I wouldn't have come in person if the magic department wasn't safe, right?"

So Bertus tried to reassure Harriet and me that we didn't need to worry about what might happen inside the magic department building.

"As long as there's someone who can kill three people in the magic department's research archive room and escape without getting caught, life is always at risk."

"Hey, if you want to reassure us, just do that, and if you want to scare us, just do that."

"Nothing is certain yet."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm just saying."

It was just a normal conversation like the one we had at the temple.

I felt the attendants around me staring at me like I was a monster.

Oh, right.

He's the prince, isn't he?

The fact that I spoke so casually and Bertus accepted it so calmly must have seemed like an impossible event to them.

That's right.

Isn't this a friendship between the top 1% and the bottom 1%? Even if I am the champion of Als.

The deeper you go, the more absurd the situation becomes.

Anyway, amidst the shocked admiration of the attendants, we soon arrived at the scene of the crime.

"Ah!"

As soon as Harriet saw the scene, she covered her mouth.

"I heard about it… but I didn't expect it to be this bad…"

Frowning, Bertus let out a short sigh.

They had expected to find a corpse.

"What… is this?"

However, they couldn't have imagined finding one with the eyes gouged out, fingers and toes brutally mutilated, and the innards grotesquely spilled out.

"As I've already reported, all three victims… were tortured for a long time before being killed…"

The brief words of the investigator explained the horrors that had unfolded at the scene.

—---

It was unclear whether it could be considered a clue, but something similar had been added.

Roswin hadn't just killed the guards, he had tortured all three of them before ending their lives.

Why had he tortured them?

Harriet could no longer bear to look at the gruesome and appalling sight, turning her gaze away from the scene and covering her mouth.

Even I, who had developed a certain degree of tolerance for such ghastly sights, felt nauseous.

"The guards who were analyzing the grimoires were all high-ranking mages belonging to the Royal Mage Corps, possessing the combat capabilities of the best Battle Mages. Moreover, they were veterans of the Great Demon War, familiar with combat."

"So, these skilled individuals were killed by a mere office worker?"

“…Yes."

Mages, too, have different fields of expertise.

Being members of the Royal Mage Corps and even having participated in the Great Demon War, they would have been among the top professionals in the world of mages.

And Roswin, the suspect, may have been skilled but had been working in a non-combat position.

"He must have been hiding his abilities."

The only conclusion was not that the victims were incompetent, but that Roswin was not an ordinary mage from the very beginning.

A spy planted by Cantus Magna in the royal court.

I couldn't help but focus more and more on that possibility.

"It is believed that Roswin had considerable knowledge of dark magic. Not only were the corpses affected, but we also detected a significant amount of dark magic in the air. Of course, it has since been purified."

"Dark magic?"

"Yes, it's conjectured that he used a Regenerate spell from the dark magic series,

which has similar effects to healing."

Upon hearing the word 'healing,' Bertus furrowed his brow.

"Healing?… Oh, you don't mean that."

Bertus looked at the wretched corpses.

"It seems he drove them to the brink of death, forcibly revived them, and then tortured them again."

"That's… impossible…"

At Bertus's words, Harriet's lips turned pale blue, and she trembled.

"The Regenerate spell of dark magic grants powerful regeneration but causes the target immense pain. Think of it as exchanging pain for healing."

"Rather than healing, it's more like a spell for torture."

"Yes, it is actually known as a spell created for that very purpose."

I thought only religious zealots would torture in such a way, but dark mages apparently used the very process of healing to inflict even greater agony.

The sound was spine-chilling. Hearing that the deceased had been tortured, forcibly revived, and then tortured again before being killed in a horrifying state of agony, Harriet couldn't help but tremble.

An emotion could be felt in Harriet's eyes.

Rage.

Harriet was more than just sad and scared about what Roswin had done – she was furious.

"If the goal was to obtain the magic tome, they could have just killed them. What could they possibly have been trying to find out by torturing them…?"

"I… I know…"

Harriet answered Bertus's question.

Harriet had been the last person to speak with Roswin before he committed the crime. He had disappeared, and Harriet had given a confused explanation to the investigators.

"He wanted to find out the origin of the stolen magic tomes…"

Seeing the torture scene, Harriet seemed to have finally grasped what Roswin truly wanted.

—---

Ellen and Charlotte were able to reach their destination soon as they walked through the Aligar shopping district.

"Here it is. If I remember correctly."

A shabby shop that had been reachable by the boy who saved her.

"It seems like no one's around."

"Indeed."

It felt like it had been closed for quite some time. The owner of the scroll shop had also disappeared at some point as the Demon King revealed himself.

-Thump, thump

Ellen approached the door and pulled the door handle, but as expected, the door was locked tight.

Charlotte muttered dejectedly.

"Even if we get in, there probably won't be much to find…"

"True."

Charlotte had forced her way into the shop before, but finding any trace of the vanished owner would have been difficult.

She knew that they wouldn't be able to get any useful information from the only clue they had. However, knowing that and actually realizing it were two different matters.

It was too late.

If only they had gone to the Demon King's castle a bit earlier. If only they had discovered the truth sooner.

If only she had been more persistent in questioning the shop owner.

Then, the world wouldn't have needed heroes, and Ellen and Reinhardt wouldn't have been in such danger.

But ironically,

The Demon King's existence was still saving Charlotte.

The presence of the Demon King made people feel the need for heroes, and as a result, Reinhardt and Ellen supported Charlotte, ensuring her safety.

If the times hadn't been so suspicious and gloomy, the world would have had a cold response to the relic's owners. Consequently, the heroes' positions wouldn't have been as strong, and Charlotte wouldn't have survived through their protection.

In the end, the Demon King still acted as a force keeping Charlotte alive.

Ellen tilted her head as she looked at the firmly closed shop door.

"Still, you never know. Should we break in?"

Without even asking the building owner's opinion, Ellen casually suggested that. Of course, they could just pay for the repairs later.

"Right, there's no reason not to check it out now that we've come this far…"

"Misses, that shop closed down quite a while ago."

Someone spoke up from behind the two of them.

As Charlotte turned her head, she saw a middle-aged man with a bushy beard

wearing an apron.

There couldn't be anything left inside the abandoned shop. But it wasn't over yet, and there was no reason to give up.

'Yes… that's right.'

"Did you know the owner of this shop?"

"Hmm? I saw them occasionally."

There was still one last resort – inquiry.

"Could you spare a moment to talk about it?"

She was grasping at straws.

And Charlotte had found a straw to grasp.

Chapter 415

The middle-aged man running the weapon shop introduced himself as Raldren.

Merchants in Aligar were not the type to waste time on unprofitable matters, but Raldren, without asking for money, brought Ellen and Charlotte to his weapon shop and engaged them in conversation.

"Elena wasn't one to mingle with people. Despite that, she was a pleasant young lady. Whenever we crossed paths, she'd greet me with a 'Good morning,' 'Good afternoon,' or 'Good evening,' and always wished me a happy day."

The shop owner's name was Elena.

Charlotte was already aware of this information, but it was new to Ellen.

"There were quite a few people who annoyed Elena. Not to mention the young men, but there were even older gentlemen who persistently pestered her, despite her not selling them anything. They should know their place. This isn't something to say outright, but there was a guy named Swinton who especially bothered Elena, even though he was a married man."

"Ah… is that so…?"

"He's a terrible person."

Charlotte broke into a cold sweat at the excessive information, while Ellen muttered briefly. It was a terse, but intensely displeased comment.

Charlotte already knew that Elena didn't have particularly close relationships with people.

Elena was kind to everyone, but she didn't build more than a certain level of closeness with anyone.

"She wasn't meant for business. Her nature was too soft… As you all know, there are times when Aligar merchants can be rather rough with their customers, but she

didn't have it in her. She would even offer discounts instead. It made me wonder how she could make a living like that…"

Charlotte already knew most of this, so it was only new information to Ellen.

With a nature that prevented her from making a profit in business, it was a wonder why she pursued it at all. Charlotte had initially thought she was an undercover agent with ulterior motives in the royal capital, but her thoughts had changed.

The Demon King had sought Elena's help as a spy of Darkland infiltrating the royal capital, and she had helped her lord by hiding him in a safe place.

It wasn't a chance encounter, but a planned meeting.

Charlotte had been internally certain that Elena was a spy for Darkland.

"But she seemed to have quite a backbone."

"A backbone?"

"I mean, with so many people harassing her, she never once faltered. They all ended up leaving with their tails between their legs, as if their souls had been sucked out. Even that Swinton fellow eventually stopped bothering her, looking utterly defeated."

Although many people harassed Elena, they all ended up leaving as if they had been thoroughly beaten.

'She said she had a boyfriend.'

Charlotte recalled finding a strand of blonde hair on Elena's bed while searching her shop. The hair color was starkly different from Elena's, and when asked whose hair it was, Elena had claimed it was her boyfriend's.

But as of now, Elena had never formed deep connections with anyone.

Thus, the notion of having a boyfriend was false. And it was unlikely for an agent on an important mission infiltrating the royal palace to be casually involved in a romantic relationship.

Therefore, the blond hair must have belonged to someone other than a boyfriend.

It couldn't be the Demon King. The hair color Charlotte had seen on the Demon King was closer to a reddish-brown, not blonde.

However, if that was a disguise, it wouldn't be too strange to think that the fallen hair belonged to the Demon King.

She had thought he would be staying in a remote area away from the royal palace, but was he actually living in the shabby second-floor shop within the palace grounds?

Blonde wasn't such a rare hair color that it could be used to identify someone conclusively.

"Anyway, I was a bit disappointed. To think she would disappear so suddenly without even saying goodbye… She left all her belongings behind, too. The landlord was happier about the items left behind than the fact that the tenant had run off."

"Ah, I see…"

It would have been a natural course of action for Elena to flee once the Demon King revealed himself. After all, Charlotte and Reinhardt had clear knowledge of the whereabouts of the suspected Demon King.

Raldren glanced around before speaking to Charlotte.

"This is something only I know."

"Oh. What is it?"

"I think… Elena actually had a fondness for younger men."

"…Excuse me?"

Charlotte was dumbfounded by the completely out-of-the-blue statement, and Ellen tilted her head in confusion.

"No… There was this one guy who came by occasionally. He had a somewhat mischievous appearance, as if he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. The kind of guy who'd go around breaking women's hearts."

"…"

"…"

Naturally, Ellen and Charlotte's gazes met.

They seemed to know who he was referring to.

They couldn't help but instinctively understand that he was talking about Reinhardt.

From the beginning, Reinhardt had frequented this shop in his role as Charlotte's messenger, so it wasn't a stretch for Raldren, the neighboring shop owner, to remember him.

"Those who wander the market with the intent to stir up trouble usually end up in a sorry state, but that guy didn't seem to be like that. And yet, he blatantly loitered around? I've said all there is to say. Yep."

It seemed Raldren was certain that Elena, who was kind to everyone yet never gave her heart to anyone, had a secret taste for younger men.

Charlotte knew this was a huge misunderstanding, and Ellen, who had heard from Charlotte, knew that the middle-aged slob was spouting nonsense.

Reinhardt probably had no reason to visit Eleris' shop after he told Charlotte she could stop delivering messages. The only other time would be when Charlotte was torn between the Demon King and Reinhardt and volunteered to tell the mage to run away. That was it.

The Demon King couldn't possibly pose such a great threat that she would simply tell him to run away. That's what Reinhardt had said.

He had also said that he would take care of the rest if he could manage.

And so, Charlotte's guilt stemmed from there.

She should have insisted on holding onto Elena instead of being indecisive at the time.

In the end, she gained no new information and had to accept that all the decisions

she made only brought about negative outcomes for everyone.

With no special information and only what was already known, further inquiry seemed pointless. It was at that moment when Charlotte was about to turn away.

"But I can't help but think that Elena closed her shop and left somewhere because of that guy."

“…Pardon?"

Another remark from Raldren caught Charlotte off guard.

Of course, it was likely that Elena had indeed left the capital after hearing Reinhardt's warning.

But how could he have come to such a conclusion when he couldn't possibly have heard that mysterious conversation?

"I heard he brought a woman with him last time."

A woman.

At those words, both Charlotte and Ellen fell silent.

"Judging by her uniform, she must be a fellow Temple student. Tsk, it seems I've got myself a new girl, let's call it quits – that's what I think he must have said. So, I suspect Elena was hurt and left because of that."

What a bizarre delusion and speculation this was.

Both Ellen and Charlotte were taken aback, but they had acquired a curious piece of information.

Reinhardt had brought a woman wearing Temple garb to Elena's shop.

Who he brought and what they discussed remained unknown.

"Both the man and the woman had solemn expressions; it seemed like they were steeled for something. Not long after, Elena closed her shop. I think that's what happened. Anyway, that blond guy, I had a bad feeling about him from the start."

While Raldren didn't know much about Reinhardt, his assertion that someone with a nasty appearance would be a nasty person made some sense.

Although his conjecture was mostly wrong, some facts remained.

Reinhardt had brought someone to Elena's shop – a place he would never visit with company.

Normally, Reinhardt would visit the basement room Eleris secured, avoiding others' eyes.

However, he had visited Eleris's shop with Lydia Schmitt under urgent circumstances, and thus couldn't afford to be cautious.

That left a trace.

"Do you remember the appearance of the woman he brought? And when was this?"

At Charlotte's question, Raldren cocked his head.

"Well, I think the woman had black hair. There was something odd about her eyes. Eerie, I guess. She didn't seem quite normal… That's probably why I remember her…"

As he pondered, he furrowed his brow as if recalling something.

"Right, now that I think about it, chaos broke out the next day because of the Demon King. The Holy Knights were massacred. It was such a huge incident that I remember."

"…"

"…"

On the day of the Demon King's attack, Reinhardt visited Elena's shop with a female student from the Temple.

And the shopkeeper was believed to be closely associated with the demon king.

Who is the woman Reinhardt brought? Why did Reinhardt look for Elena?

Ellen and Charlotte's eyes met.

"……”

"……”

Neither of them said a word.

No, they couldn't say a word.

—---

After completing their investigation, Charlotte gave a small reward to Raldren.

It was the answer to Raldren's question about why they were asking such things. Upon receiving the gold coin, Raldren nodded his head as if he understood the meaning and didn't ask any more questions.

"…”

"…”

Strange thoughts swirled in the heads of Charlotte and Ellen.

Too much thinking can be a problem.

Both Ellen and Charlotte were more than capable of mentally exploring various situations.

Based on the timeline, Charlotte told Reinhardt to forget about the demon king after Riverrier Lanze was attacked.

But Reinhardt went to see Elena on the day of the attack.

Since he said there was no need to deliver letters anymore, Reinhardt had no reason to visit Elena.

Of course, Reinhardt could have visited Elena privately. It wasn't just the messenger role that he played, but also the possibility that he had private conversations with Elena, which could have led to a close relationship.

However, it was a bit strange for Reinhardt to visit Elena privately, knowing that she and those under her protection were suspicious.

Not only was it strange, but he even brought a female temple student with him.

And that very day, Riverrier Lanze was attacked.

Elena was a mage.

Charlotte knew that the demon king's forces included powerful mages.

If there were no other mages, the likelihood of Elena being that mage was very high.

Reinhardt took a temple student to Elena's shop. And Elena participated in the attack on Riverrier Lanze that night.

And.

On the day of the Riverrier Lanze attack.

That day was the Miss Temple contest. Reinhardt did not participate in the contest.

It was a painful memory for Ellen, and Charlotte knew of the situation as well.

Ellen tried to recall.

She remembered Reinhardt, who returned to the temple very late with frostbitten cheeks and hands, unable to do anything.

She recalled Reinhardt that day.

"Ellen."

Charlotte softly called Ellen's name.

"Yeah."

Both of them considered numerous possibilities in their heads.

"Let's not say anything until we're sure."

"…”

"Until we're sure, let's not even think about it."

They didn't know what conclusion their numerous conjectures would lead to, but what lay beyond the curtain of darkness.

Somehow.

The truth seemed so terrifying that they stopped thinking altogether.

"Yeah. Let's do that."

Ellen whispered in agreement.

Chapter 416

Darkland.

"It's certainly no ordinary place."

Archduke Saint Owan muttered quietly as he walked across the fog-shrouded land.

-Crack!

-Screech!

A magical beast was struck by lightning sent by the surrounding mages before the Archduke could even lift a hand. The creature burst into flames and disappeared in a puff of ash.

At the moment, Archduke Saint Owan and his battalion of mages were deep within the Labyrinth Zone.

The moment they entered the labyrinth, it didn't merely begin - it had already started the instant they entered the area shrouded in thick fog.

The Archduke and his mages carefully advanced, exploring the area one step at a time.

"The concentration of mana in the air is irregular."

"Yes, I can sense that as well."

Though they could not see through the fog, the Archduke could feel the mana around them fluctuating.

Mana in the atmosphere was typically consistent, even if not entirely uniform. The constant change in mana signified that transformations were continuously occurring around them.

"The environment is changing in real-time as we move. The attacking magical beasts

aren't actual creatures but variables created by this labyrinth."

The Archduke was no amateur mage.

Therefore, his approach to the labyrinth was several levels above that of other adventurers, who haphazardly charged forward while battling its monsters.

He didn't move carelessly.

This labyrinth couldn't be conquered by merely moving.

As the Archduke knew, this labyrinth was well-known throughout the continent.

It had reached a point where there was virtually no one in Darkland who hadn't heard of it.

Thus, countless adventurers were attracted to it like moths to a flame.

Some wandered for days before returning, having barely survived, while others never made it back.

Those who managed to escape the labyrinth with a few grimoires in hand struck gold.

Yet, the central government had never conquered the labyrinth, so the Archduke personally led an elite group to attempt the feat.

"Doesn't it feel like we've encountered too few people compared to the number of adventurers said to be in this labyrinth?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Before entering the labyrinth, the Archduke had gathered information from those who had experienced it firsthand at a nearby base.

The labyrinth drew in a vast number of adventurers, but most of them managed to return unscathed.

It seemed as if the labyrinth wasn't designed for slaughter, but rather to exhaust and confuse people until they gave up and left. The magical beasts it produced were so

trivial that the Archduke didn't even need to personally engage them.

Thus, the weary adventurers would rest and reenter the labyrinth, repeating the process in the hopes of someday reaching its depths.

The ability to retry continuously despite constant failure was the reason this labyrinth drew so many adventurers.

Though the odds were low, there was a chance to discover incredibly valuable grimoires, and the risk to one's life was comparatively low. It was no wonder adventurers couldn't resist the temptation.

And so, the archduke was aware of the fact that a vast number of adventurers wandered in this enormous region.

Due to this, if one were able to actually see the people within this labyrinth, they would undoubtedly encounter other adventurer parties.

However, during the several hours the archduke wandered, he had only come across one adventurer party thus far. Upon seeing the archduke and his companions, they were evidently frightened and hastily disappeared into the unknown.

"It seems like there's a dimensional overlap. It's not just one labyrinth, but perhaps dozens or even hundreds of labyrinths layered together. That's why we might not be able to encounter other people."

Though occupying the same space, the overlapping dimensions meant that everyone would enter different paths within the labyrinth. The archduke surmised that this phenomenon was the true nature of the labyrinth.

"The core of this labyrinth isn't what's important, but rather discovering what this labyrinth is could change the world."

The labyrinth itself was already akin to the main body.

Overlaying hundreds of dimensions onto a single space, the labyrinth also had a constantly changing environment. The archduke sensed the surrounding mana and made an educated guess about the true nature of the labyrinth before drawing his conclusion.

"From the beginning, this labyrinth has been designed to prevent us from reaching its core by altering the paths. Unless the master of the labyrinth guides us to the inner depths, we'll never be able to reach it."

With a constantly shifting labyrinth, there was no path that would lead to the exit. As one wandered, their sense of direction would be lost, and whether they walked here or there, they would ultimately wander aimlessly as the labyrinth master intended.

His followers waited for the archduke's judgment.

The Saint Owan family, with its long history.

Once a family of losers in a region due to their practice of magic, they came from humble beginnings as tanners.

Moreover, the Saint Owan family was known for never forgetting their roots.

While they held power and glory, they never lost sight of their roots as mages and continued to hone their magical arts generation after generation. The pinnacle of their magic was passed down to their successors.

Yet, they remained on the righteous path.

They never succumbed to the desire for power.

They always shunned evil and corrupt power, kept in mind that the pinnacle of their magical arts could never be achieved through such means, and distanced themselves from anything impure.

The Saint Owan family's high reputation came not only from their exceptional magical abilities but also from their purity of never getting close to the path of evil.

While the path of evil offered rapid progress, in the end, the only thing that could be achieved through it was the way of evil itself.

The archduke focused on the flow of mana around him.

The labyrinth was designed so that one would become lost the moment they entered. With each step taken, one would be drawn into the labyrinth's dozens or even hundreds of illusory dimensions.

Since it was impossible to find the exit within this labyrinth, there was only one way to enter the exit.

One must escape from the hundreds of overlapping illusory dimensions of the labyrinth and head toward the original dimension that truly exists.

"…"

The archduke sought the path.

Sensing the overlapping dimensions and, within those dimensions, a single path.

Only by carving a path back to the original dimension could they escape this labyrinth.

The task was not to find the living door within the labyrinth, nor to destroy the labyrinth itself.

Even for a seasoned magician, the work would take several months. The labyrinth was not only complex in its pathways, but also the calculations required to find the single living door were daunting.

It was as if the Grand Duke was trying to find the eye of a typhoon in the midst of a raging storm, cutting through the wind in real-time changing and generating dimensions.

However.

Geniuses who would leave a mark in the history of magic were not born without reason.

Harriet de Saint-Owan was the Grand Duke's daughter.

"Here we go."

As such, it was only natural that the Grand Duke's abilities were incomparable to those of an ordinary magician.

-Rumble!

As the Grand Duke waved his hand, a dimensional gate opened with a gaping void.

"Everyone, follow me."

The entourage followed the Grand Duke as he headed towards the exit.

Upon stepping through the gate, the Grand Duke looked around. He showed no sign of pride or satisfaction in having breached the labyrinth where countless adventurers and magicians wandered.

It was a matter-of-fact expression, having done something he was naturally capable of.

"Not much has changed."

Although they had breached the labyrinth, the surroundings were still shrouded in fog, and there wasn't much difference from where they had been walking.

"The flow of mana is stable."

"Yes, it seems we've reached the right place, even though it looks no different."

The flow of mana, which had been causing peculiar disturbances and changing the surrounding environment, had stabilized. The labyrinth could be considered a vast dimensional gate spread across the surrounding mountains. The moment one entered, they were trapped within a virtual dimension.

Therefore, the interior of the actual labyrinth was bound to be a peaceful area, devoid of any devices or mazes. Only dense fog prevailed.

With no paths to be lost upon, all that remained was to find the Lich's tomb, which was said to be hidden somewhere in the area. If the tomb was also sealed by a similar barrier, it would take considerable time, but the Grand Duke had already discovered the spell to break it.

"Keep in mind, we are not going to obtain the grimoires."

The Grand Duke spoke to his entourage as he walked slowly.

"An evil being will not research pure magic. We will destroy most of those grimoires.

Those blinded by foolish desires should turn back; I will open the way."

"Your Grace, the grimoires we discover may hold considerable magical value."

"Yes, they surely will."

The Grand Duke was well aware of the value of the grimoires they had already discovered.

"Evil power can also be used to build good. It surely can."

The Grand Duke knew the value of power and understood that it depended on the will of the wielder rather than its essence.

"Yet, in a world where most do not build good with good power, what is the point of evil power?"

Even in a world where knights and priests commit evil as naturally as breathing, it is far too naive to expect that evil powers will have a positive influence on the world.

Evil forces are to be avoided at all costs.

That is the minimum standard of goodness that the Archduke believes in. It is also a teaching that has been passed down through the generations in the House of Saint Owan.

Magic is already a powerful force, and even stronger magic might bring harm to the world, according to the Archduke's judgment.

The Archduke is not going to the realm of magic to embrace the new vision and discoveries made by the liches but to destroy them.

How long had they been walking?

"Someone is here."

"Indeed."

The Archduke saw the faint figure of someone through the fog.

Could it be the master of the labyrinth?

Or another visitor to the labyrinth, like himself?

The Archduke has confidence in his abilities but does not allow himself to be arrogant.

Since he managed to penetrate the labyrinth, it is possible that someone else has done the same. Hence, someone might be ahead of him, having already broken through the labyrinth.

"Do not be afraid. I have no intention of hostility."

Before taking action, the Archduke revealed his intentions. If the other party attacked, he would have to retaliate, but there was no need to shed blood needlessly.

It was clear that the other party was no ordinary being since they were present in the area equivalent to the exit of the labyrinth, which could never be reached.

Upon hearing the voice from behind, the figure turned its head.

-……

In the silence, a woman with a cold expression and long black hair gazed at the Archduke, her head turned to face him.

She wore simple clothing and a cloak. She was unarmed, and her skin was pale.

"I did not expect a guest."

The woman spoke quietly in a monotonous and cold tone. Neither hostility nor friendliness could be sensed from her calm gaze. Although she was undoubtedly skilled enough to navigate the labyrinth, the Archduke found it difficult to ascertain her identity.

"Did you come here to find the dungeon, milady?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

The woman slightly bowed her head as if in greeting and replied.

"Under normal circumstances, I would just pass by, but considering the situation and the location, I must ask. I am Raphael de Saint Owan of the Saint Owan Duchy. May I inquire as to who you are and where you are from?"

The woman tilted her head slightly and stared at the Archduke.

Her expression showed no fear or curiosity about the many wizards behind the Archduke or his presence.

"Luna."

The woman, who bore the name of the moon, quietly spoke.

"I am Luna of Rezaira."

The Archduke did not recognize the name of the village.

"I apologize for my ignorance, as I am unfamiliar with the name of the place."

"It is only natural that you would not know, as it is a small village deep within a secluded mountain valley."

The woman from the secluded mountain valley had penetrated the labyrinth before the Archduke, who was well-versed in magic even among the great wizards.

No one in the Archduke's entourage believed the woman's introduction as a simple country woman. However, she merely stared at the Archduke, giving no further explanation.

Neither hostility nor friendliness could be sensed from her calm gaze.

The duke couldn't tell if she was a foe or an ally, but either way, he was reluctant to let her go ahead or to pass her by.

She appeared to be a young woman, but the duke couldn't determine her true age. Those who had mastered the circulation of magical power often had appearances that did not match their age, such as the leader of Shanafel, Saviolin Turner.

She did not seem to be the master of a dungeon or labyrinth.

However, if she had arrived to secure the grimoire, a battle would be inevitable.

The duke tensed up and spoke.

"Since we cannot know each other's intentions, let me say in advance that I intend to destroy the dungeon and burn the grimoire. What do you plan to do?"

"I have no business with the grimoire, so if your mission is as you say, we will not conflict with each other."

Why would she be in this place, having entered an area famous for the grimoire, yet showing no interest in it? Although he couldn't trust the extraordinary stranger at first sight, there seemed to be no apparent will to exchange hostilities.

"Since our paths are the same, how about we travel together?"

"If it is fine with you, Your Grace, I would be happy to."

The woman, who had been expressionless, showed a faint smile at the duke's proposal.

Although he couldn't be certain, the duke had a peculiar feeling that this woman would not become his enemy. However, relying on such intuition was not in his nature.

As he was about to move forward with Luna, the woman who introduced herself, paying close attention to her presence -

"Oh dear, I didn't expect to have company already."

A young man appeared through the fog from the side of the forest.

Another person in addition to the woman.

The duke furrowed his brow at the presence of more individuals who had breached the labyrinth.

The woman stared at the newly appeared man, her attitude not much different from when she had faced the duke, seemingly more observant than taken aback.

The man showed a slightly off-kilter smile and scratched the back of his head.

"Given the situation, I'll get straight to the point. We all seem to be formidable individuals, and fighting now wouldn't be beneficial for anyone. So, how about we clear the path first and discuss the details later?"

The man who appeared out of nowhere got to the point immediately.

While the woman showed no interest in the grimoire, the man didn't hide that his goal was the dungeon's grimoire.

There was no doubt about their abilities since they had penetrated the labyrinth.

Fighting now would only benefit the other party, so the suggestion was to clear the path first and then target each other's throats.

A woman with an unknown intention.

A man with an excessively obvious intention.

After a moment of contemplation, the duke nodded.

"Let it be so."

Regardless of the outcome, the duke agreed that dividing forces before revealing the true nature of the dungeon would be a disservice to each other.

"Raphael de Saint-Owan."

Upon the duke's introduction, the man smiled.

"My name is Roswin."

This too was a name the duke had never heard before.

Chapter 417

I felt suffocated.

"Uh…”

Without any warning or reason, it felt as if someone was suddenly choking me, and I had no choice but to stop in my tracks.

"Reinhardt? What's wrong?"

“…Did you receive a shock?"

After checking the information about the corpses and briefly discussing in another space, Harriet and Bertus looked at me, concerned by my sudden change in demeanor.

"No, it's just…”

No, that's not it.

Although I did witness a horrifying scene, there was no reason for me to suddenly feel suffocated.

Without any reason or warning, it felt as if someone was strangling me, making it difficult to breathe.

An eerie feeling, as if something terrible was about to happen. This intense anxiety, with no apparent cause or origin, was a sensation I had experienced before.

It was similar to the symptoms of a panic disorder I had suffered from when I had been going through a lot of hardship in the past. The sudden sense of crisis in a calm state was both unfamiliar and familiar.

"What's wrong… Reinhardt…”

Seeing me break out in a cold sweat and shivering, Harriet gently took my hand.

Although Harriet's gesture made me feel somewhat better, I couldn't shake off the strange feeling.

It's been a long time since I had a panic disorder. I knew this sensation wasn't rooted in that.

This was a warning from my intuition.

I had never experienced such a sense of crisis where I couldn't breathe properly.

What is happening, or rather, what's already happening?

Is Roswin attacking us from the Magic Department, or something similar? If so, does that mean he hasn't left the Magic Department yet?

The fact that I had never felt such pressure before made me fear that something of a different dimension might be happening, but I couldn't know what it was until it occurred.

Something is going to happen.

Since I can't know what it is, I can't be afraid in advance.

"Huuh… Uh, it just happened suddenly."

As I took a deep breath, Bertus chuckled.

"I thought you were used to it, but it seems that's not quite the case?"

"I can't help it. I keep… getting flashes of it…"

Apparently, they both thought I was reacting this way due to the shock of witnessing the gruesome scene.

In reality, the scene was indeed horrifying enough to warrant such a reaction.

Although the real reason was different, as I seemed to calm down a bit, Bertus crossed his arms and began to speak.

"Anyway, Roswin was curious about the origin of the grimoires?"

"Yeah, it seemed like he was coveting them, but… I don't know, it felt like he was more curious about where they came from… That's why I think he tortured those people."

His motive wasn't money, but the origin of the grimoires, which led him to commit these crimes. Of course, he took all the grimoires as well.

This statement added more weight to my speculation that Roswin might be affiliated with Cantus Magna.

"Perhaps it's the tomb of the Lich, recently discovered in the Darklands… That's what I was thinking."

"Ah, you mean there?"

Bertus furrowed his brow.

"Hmm. It's certainly a possibility."

From Bertus's reaction, it seemed that the stolen grimoire from yesterday was not from the Lich's tomb - the bait that the Black Order and I had set up hadn't reached here yet.

"What's important is that Roswin probably didn't manage to extract the information he really wanted by torturing the three dead wizards."

It must have meant that the deceased knew nothing about the origin of the grimoire.

"What's even more important is how Roswin managed to escape not only from the Magic Department but also from the Imperial Palace…"

"They said there's no record of him leaving the Magic Department or the Imperial Palace, right?"

"That's right."

At Harriet's question, Bertus nodded.

"First of all, it's clear that Roswin was hiding his true abilities. From the beginning, the records showed that he shouldn't have been able to handle even one of the

guards on duty. But he subdued all three without a fight and even tortured them."

With his expertise in dark magic, Roswin had to be a wizard with far more incredible skills than he let on.

"But the thing is, it's impossible to enter or leave the interior of the Imperial Palace like a temple through spatial teleportation. To leave the Magic Department, you have to go through the main entrance, and to leave the Imperial Palace, you have to use one of the four gates…"

Whether it was possible to fly in and out like Sarkegaar was uncertain. I don't know if Roswin can transform into a sparrow, but even if such a transformation spell exists, it seems impossible unless he becomes a complete creature like Sarkegaar. A dispel field must be laid out in the airspace above.

"Yet, they searched the entire Magic Department building and found no trace. Even if he somehow escaped, he should still be in the Imperial Palace. Hiding with simple disguise magic or invisibility is said to be impossible."

The assumption that Roswin was hiding somewhere seemed plausible, but he wasn't in the Magic Department and they hadn't found him despite searching the entire palace.

Spatial teleportation couldn't be used, and it was unlikely that he had casually slipped out of the Magic Department building with a disguise spell.

The one who had the audacity to commit murder in the Imperial Palace couldn't be ordinary.

Could Cantus Magna have neutralized the barrier and escaped?

No.

It couldn't be.

This is the Royal Magic Department.

The building itself is huge, of course, and there are bound to be countless other departments performing various functions, like the magical research library.

It's a misconception that spatial teleportation is impossible within the Imperial Palace.

Hadn't they installed a warp gate in the area where spatial teleportation was possible, deep beneath the Spring Palace?

Clearly, I had moved through the miniature gate not only from the outside to the inside, but also from the inside to the outside.

"By any chance, is there a facility researching warp gates in the Magic Division?"

At my question, Bertus and Harriet exchanged glances.

—---

Warp gates were fundamentally the magic of the empire.

Thus, it was only natural that the research on warp gates was conducted in the Royal Magic Division, not the Wizard Guild or the Magic Association, and that there were facilities for warp gate research underground.

Therefore, within the facility, there were numerous gates at various stages of development, though none were of an extraordinarily large size.

Since all research had been halted due to a murder case in the Magic Division, Bertus called the person in charge to discuss the matter.

"Well… I think it would be impossible."

When asked if the gates here could be activated and connected to external gates, the researcher shook his head.

"The gates here are not made to standard specifications; most of them are experimental gates for special purposes. Most of them are incomplete…"

"Is there at least one gate that functions properly?"

There were many gates, but if even one of them worked properly, it would mean that it could communicate with the outside, so Bertus inquired.

"Yes. There is a functioning warp gate, and there is indeed a warp gate that is not for testing purposes… However, it would still be impossible to escape through it."

"Why is that?"

"All the warp gates produced in this facility are not regular gates. The gates inside the facility are connected to each other to view the entire gate system. So, these gates have never been connected to external gates."

"If they have never been connected, does that mean they could be?"

"To do that, we would have to include these warp gates in the regular imaginary dimension map."

"What does that mean?"

Bertus seemed confused by the technical terms that only warp gate technicians would understand, and I felt the same way. I only knew that the imaginary dimension map was similar to a subway map.

Harriet spoke to Bertus.

"Warp gates need rules to determine which gates they connect to and are connected by, in order to function properly. That is, each gate must be pre-designated as to which gate it will sync with."

To include a regular gate in the imaginary dimension map, not only should the gate itself exist as a physical facility, but it should also be added to the entire system.

"So, there's no way to connect without going through that process?"

"Connecting this facility's gate to an external gate without the exact coordinates could cause a collision with the route of another gate. In that case, a dimensional distortion phenomenon could occur…"

"Enough with the complicated explanations. Are you saying an accident would happen? What kind of accident?"

“Using this gate to go outside, of course, not only affects the person attempting to leave, but also everyone using the destination gate, as they may be sent to a

"nonexistent place." I'm not sure if such a place exists, but there have been quite a few cases of people not returning from gate experiments gone wrong in the past."

At these words, not only Bertus but also Harriet and I widened our eyes.

A nonexistent place.

Being sent to a fictitious dimension and becoming unable to return to the present world—is that what it means?

"So, escaping through this gate is impossible, is that it?"

"We can attempt to activate the gate and escape, and we might even arrive safely, but… it is an excessively dangerous method. It's a gamble with our lives at stake."

I don't know the details, but the principle is simple.

Imagine overlaying a random route on an underground subway transfer station that's operating smoothly with countless people's calculations. The trains would collide, destroying the route map and killing all passengers.

A warp gate is both a station and a train itself.

Even if a train and a station are prepared, laying down a route without thorough calculations will cause a large accident. Thus, escaping through this warp gate to the imperial road is insane.

Therefore, in the case of using an already activated gate, we would be traveling along a preexisting path.

In this case, we have to create a nonexistent path as we go. That's why it's a gamble with a high risk of accidents.

The artifact I possess, which leads to the underground of the Spring Palace, is a kind of warp gate distortion device. However, it's still a properly designed warp gate connecting the outside world to the underground of the Spring Palace, even if people don't know about it.

The person in charge said that escaping through the gate in this facility is impossible and would be a life-risking gamble.

"No… It could have been possible."

But Harriet said so with a trembling voice.

"Saint Owan, what do you mean?"

At Bertus's question, Harriet's complexion turned pale.

"If you understood the map I showed you yesterday… it could have been possible…"

Only I could understand Harriet's words.

I don't know the specifics of what Harriet did yesterday, but I knew she had achieved something that would greatly help improve the warp gate system.

And Roswin saw Harriet's research results firsthand.

He wasn't an outsider; he was an expert in handling warp gate systems.

Harriet calmly explained what happened yesterday, or rather, the theory she presented, not Roswin.

"Even if he were a magician with no knowledge of the warp gate system, that man was an expert. He was able to understand my theory at a glance. It's not about using my theory. I had annotated the fictitious dimension map entirely. So… which gates are connected in what way, where there are vulnerabilities, empty parts of the dimensional coordinates, for efficiency…"

Although a layman wouldn't know how to handle the gate, Roswin, as an expert in gate theory, was able to do so.

He utilized the content written by Harriet to establish the theory.

Harriet had annotated every existing imaginary dimension map to formulate the theory.

She had deciphered the enormous stack of imaginary dimension maps, which were too complex for many experts to understand, and analyzed all the connections in the warp gate network.

"So, even though it's impossible to connect a single warp gate to the entire network, if you properly understood the map I provided, you could calculate a safe path to connect to a specific gate."

Harriet's theory was still too early to be put into practical use.

However, Roswin utilized the basis for the theory, not the theory itself.

While constructing the tangled web of connections between gates was difficult, it was not hard to create a single safe route to connect to a specific gate.

"Of course, it's a risky and unverified method… but it seemed worth a try…"

At the point when Harriet showed him the map, Roswin had already been planning the crime.

Unknowingly, Harriet provided him with the optimal escape route during the aftermath of the crime.

"Curiously… it seemed he liked it more than he should have…"

Upon learning that the suspect had used her map for his escape, Harriet's face went pale.

Bertus bit his lip with a grave expression.

"So, it's certain that Roswin used this facility to escape."

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…"

At Harriet's apology, which was tinged with a bluish pallor, Bertus offered a bitter smile.

"Either way, he was determined to escape. He killed three people here, so he probably planned to kill everyone in his way while escaping. But thanks to you providing a safer escape route, only three died instead of dozens or even hundreds."

"…"

The extent of Roswin's actual combat ability was unknown.

However, he was powerful enough to easily subdue three high-ranking mages and kill them.

Even if Roswin had gotten the idea from Harriet's suggestion and fled, he had already been planning the crime.

This meant that he was confident in escaping the palace by force even if he hadn't used the gate.

So, if Roswin had been inspired by Harriet's words and escaped through the gate, fewer people would have died than otherwise.

"Even if it's not true, think of it that way."

Even if it wasn't the truth, they had to think that way.

Bertus' words were appreciated, even though he wasn't the one directly involved.

—---

Neither Charlotte nor Ellen had learned anything definitive through their investigations; instead, they had developed suspicions.

Suspicions involving Reinhardt.

Charlotte and Ellen did not exchange any words about how this could be connected.

They feared that the moment they discussed it, something they didn't want to imagine could become a reality.

The two walked in silence.

Charlotte's next destination was the Imperial Bureau of Identity Management.

It was a place that served as the civil affairs office.

"Even if she used an alias, her identity would still be registered. There might be some clues to trace based on that. Though her hometown and such might be lies, we could at least deduce when she started her activities in the Empire."

"True."

A spy from Darkland, who operated under the alias of Elena.

Charlotte was determined to pursue her as far as possible.

Even if her identity was fake, she would have registered it, leaving a record of her origin and other information. Charlotte had seen her identification and asked various questions, but she couldn't remember the finer details, like her hometown.

Naturally, such personal information couldn't be accessed casually, but Charlotte was a princess.

Just as Bertus could search the personal details of all Imperial citizens with a word, so could Charlotte.

"Please retrieve and display all identity records registered under the name Elena in the Empire."

"Yes, I will prepare them immediately."

Upon the sudden appearance of the princess and her request for information, the bureau director began to work swiftly.

In the director's office, Ellen and Charlotte waited for the documents to be prepared.

Both of them knew that their current target was not Elena.

They didn't want to admit or even think about it, but they knew.

That Reinhardt was suspicious.

They knew without speaking it out loud.

"…"

"…"

Neither of them spoke, knowing that if they started a conversation, something might change drastically.

After some time had passed,

"Here it is."

A list of all individuals with the name Elena in the Empire was prepared.

Charlotte planned to deduce the activity period through the place of birth and identity registration date, and later call in the building owner of the shop to ask more details about Elena.

With that in mind, Charlotte went through the documents of people with the same name.

"This one."

Rustle

Charlotte picked out an identification document that matched the face of Elena she remembered.

Charlotte already knew Elena's face, so what she needed was the information written in text.

However,

That document became decisive evidence for Ellen.

"Wait… Just a moment…"

"Huh?"

"I… I know this person…"

Ellen's voice trembled.

"I know her."

At those words, Charlotte's brow furrowed.

"What? You've seen her before?"

Ellen had a good memory. That's why she couldn't help but suddenly realize something.

"Last year, during the second-semester group mission… In that castle… I saw a statue that looked just like her…"

It was a face that subtly resembled the statue, though it was different when examined closely.

A mage named Rellia who had briefly accompanied them in Darkland.

And the incident when they found a statue resembling Rellia in Castle Epiaux.

The events were so deeply etched in Ellen's mind that when she saw Elena's picture, the memories of that time inevitably came back to life.

"A statue? Why is there a statue of this person in the castle?"

"This person…"

Ellen mumbles with a trembling voice, in the grip of intense shock.

"A dragon…"

"What the hell… no, what are you talking about?"

Almost cursing in disbelief, Charlotte barely suppressed her urge to make light of the situation.

However, regardless of Charlotte's astonishment, Ellen's complexion was turning pale.

The enigmatic sorcerer Rellia, who had claimed to be a dragon.

A statue resembling Rellia in Castle Epiaux.

And Elena's picture, which seemed to be an exact replica of that statue.

In Ellen's memory, Rellia and the person in Elena's picture did not appear to be the same.

However, once a link in the form of a statue, a sort of neutralized appearance, emerged between them, Ellen couldn't help but entertain the idea.

The sorcerer Rellia, who hid her true abilities and followed them.

Reinhardt was with her at that time as well.

Ellen had a good memory.

“…Wouldn't it be good to have one more sorcerer with us?"

Though they had met the self-proclaimed dragon sorcerer Rellia by chance, it was Reinhardt who had intentionally brought her along.

"…”

With wide eyes, Ellen could not help but stare at Elena's picture.

Chapter 418

Roswin had never left the Magic Department or the Imperial Palace.

It was almost a foregone conclusion that he had escaped using the Magic Department's warp gate research facility.

Of course, since this wasn't entirely certain, the defensive posture of the Imperial Palace and the Magic Department had not been relaxed.

Bertus, Harriet, and I left the Magic Department building. Our attendants followed at a distance, and we walked quietly through the Imperial Palace.

Harriet was still pale from the realization that she had unknowingly aided a criminal's escape.

"Although they're searching Roswin's residence, it's unlikely he left any incriminating evidence behind… Even if we can't determine his true level as a magician, capturing him is virtually impossible if he's escaped."

If Roswin had escaped the Imperial Palace the previous night, tracking him down would be impossible.

Bertus seemed quite uneasy, and understandably so.

Such an event had occurred within the palace, and the perpetrator remained at large.

"We may not be able to catch him, but there are a few things we've learned."

Bertus inferred the truth from the incidents that had occurred and those that hadn't.

"His goal wasn't the grimoire itself, but the source of the grimoire. If what we've heard is true."

"Mm."

Roswin was more interested in the source of the grimoire than the grimoire itself.

"But the slain magicians didn't know the source of the grimoire. What's important is that he couldn't attack those who were highly likely to know the source."

He was confident in escaping the Magic Department, but the only person who might know the source of the grimoire was untouchable.

In other words, he couldn't touch the Emperor.

Thus, Roswin was indeed skilled but not enough to single-handedly breach Tetra. Of course, where would one find someone with such skills?

"For someone like that to have infiltrated the Imperial Palace… If he's an underling of the Demon King, it'll be a real headache."

Bertus fell silent for a moment, lost in thought. Of course, there was no connection between Roswin and me, but the Empire naturally suspected the Demon King's involvement when strange events occurred.

"I don't know if I should ask this… But where did that grimoire really come from?"

"Ah, that."

The decisive reason why Roswin had killed people.

"I don't know either."

Bertus didn't know either.

"Charlotte brought it from somewhere."

Upon hearing this, I couldn't help but instantly understand the source of the grimoire.

I had thought that adventurers had brought it from the Lich's Tomb, but it turned out that Charlotte had brought it from the Demon King's Castle's underground.

"Wait, doesn't that mean Charlotte's in danger?"

At my anxious question, Bertus shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, very few people know that the stolen grimoire was brought by Charlotte, and none of them were among those who died yesterday."

Fortunately, Roswin didn't discover that Charlotte was the source of the grimoire and had no choice but to escape the Imperial Palace.

Upon hearing this, it seems likely that the scoundrel believes the Tomb of the Lich is the source of the magic tome. I'm not sure why… But if he really wants to know the origin of the magic tome and went through all this trouble, he might have gone that way.

Bertus gazes at me with a subtle smile on his face.

"And Reinhardt, for some reason, I think you might know the real origin of the magic tome."

"…"

"Well, I don't intend to pry it out of you."

I could have lied, but it didn't seem like it would work on Bertus.

As Bertus said, Roswin probably fled the palace without discovering the real origin of the magic tome.

If so, Charlotte would be safe.

If Roswin is Cantus Magna, it is clear that they will soon approach the Tomb of the Lich located in Darkland.

They want a large collection of rare magic tomes, and they will think the real origin is the Tomb of the Lich, not the underground of the Demon King's Castle.

Of course, even if the real origin is not there, the rumors of rare magic tomes being discovered in the Tomb of the Lich would be enough for Cantus Magna to approach.

Something is coming.

What kind of reality would this ominous warning that grips my heart become?

I could not know.

And then.

"Your Highness!"

From afar, someone hurriedly rushed towards us, bringing urgent news. The messenger who arrived in a short time whispered something to Bertus with an anxious expression.

Bertus's brow furrowed ominously upon hearing the news.

“…What? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

As Harriet and I stared intently, Bertus bit his lip.

He seemed to be both dumbfounded and angry.

"They say there's a secret room in Roswin's house. They've just discovered it."

A secret room.

Was there any evidence in there?

"But, the stolen magic tomes are just lying around in there?"

"What?"

“…Why?"

"What the hell is he doing?"

Bertus cursed in confusion at the incomprehensible situation.

—---

Bertus, Harriet, and I left the palace.

Bertus insisted on checking it himself, and so did I.

"…"

"What is this…?"

"It's really there…"

Upon entering the secret room hidden in Roswin's residence, we found numerous magic tomes scattered on the floor.

It was an impressive collection. Judging by the sheer amount, it seemed likely that a magic backpack had been used to transport them, rather than Charlotte carrying them alone.

It was now certain that Roswin had stolen the magic tomes and fled the palace.

The important thing is that he had vanished, leaving the stolen magic tomes scattered around the secret room.

It's clear from the fact that all the magic tomes were open that he had checked their contents.

The important question was, if he was Cantus Magna and needed the magic tomes, why on earth did he leave them scattered like this?

Had he managed to memorize the content well enough to make copies in the meantime?

"There's no way they thought this room wouldn't be discovered…"

"Indeed."

At Harriet's words, Bertus nodded. They wouldn't have trusted the secret room enough to leave everything so carelessly exposed. Yet, it had been discovered so quickly.

Bertus's expression had become fierce.

Why? What could be the reason?

I was wondering the same thing.

The one presumed to be Cantus Magna had carelessly left the magic tomes behind and vanished.

Of course, the magic tomes themselves might not be important to Cantus Magna. They could have a unique device to record and remember magic.

But one thing was certain.

The scattered magic tomes indicated that Roswin was acting quite hastily.

"I think he might have gone to the Lich's Tomb."

At my words, Bertus and Harriet nodded.

If Harriet's words were true, Roswin had been curious about the origins of the magic tomes. If the origin was more important than the tomes themselves, the chances of him heading towards the Lich's Tomb with wrong information were high.

Having already understood these magic tomes, was someone planning to seize them before others could break through the Lich's Tomb?

If the full force of Cantus Magna was headed to the Lich's Tomb, then the power of Antirianus and the Black Order within the dungeon might not be enough.

Bertus clenched his teeth audibly.

"Yes, it would be great to find out what's inside the Lich's Tomb, which is surrounded by rumors, and cut off the head of the insolent bastard who wreaked havoc in the palace."

Bertus yelled towards the agents waiting outside the secret room.

"Gather Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps!"

The furious First Prince's shout echoed.

Following Cantus Magna, the empire's elites were heading toward the Lich's Tomb.

The situation was growing increasingly massive. Bertus looked at me with a serious gaze.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"You should go as well."

I thought I would be excluded, but Bertus's judgment differed from my expectations.

"If you capture the assassin suspect of murder in the palace and break through the Lich's Tomb, there will be no greater achievement for a rookie hero."

Bertus was making a decision to make the most of this situation. Even in a crisis, he was thinking of ways to achieve the best outcome.

For the hero's achievements.

I had more than enough personal reasons to go there myself.

"Alright."

At my response, Bertus nodded.

"Me, me too!"

Unable to hold back, Harriet interjected.

"I want… to go too…"

Though she was scared, Harriet felt a sense of responsibility for the situation. It was only natural that she wanted to join, especially when I was going too.

Bertus silently stared at Harriet.

He didn't expect me to capture Roswin and break through the Lich's Tomb on my own.

Most of the work would be done by Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps, and I would

just add a finishing touch.

In essence, we were hardly in any danger.

"Fine, if that's what you really want."

Thus, Bertus did not belittle or disregard the courage shown by Harriet and agreed to her request.

—---

Bertus instructed Harriet and me to join the empire's elite forces headed to the tomb of the Lich.

However, we couldn't leave immediately as it was necessary to gather the troops and prepare for the journey. The Shanafel Knights and the imperial mages were not always stationed at the palace; some were dispatched on various missions, so it took time to assemble them.

At least a day.

We had a day to spare.

So Harriet and I decided to return to the temple for now to regroup. Bertus would go back to the palace to discuss with the emperor how to handle the situation.

A dangerous battle was certain to ensue.

I joined for the sake of achieving new feats as a hero, and Harriet felt responsible for the situation, so we both had our reasons.

And more importantly, I needed to inform Lucinil about this news as soon as possible.

The Cantus Magna would come, but even more so, the full might of the empire would be unleashed.

Harriet's expression was stern and serious.

"It's going to be dangerous, isn't it?"

All the silent Harriet could say was that.

"Of course it's going to be dangerous."

"…"

"For those who will be there, not us."

"…Huh?"

Harriet was startled by my seemingly out-of-place remark.

"No, it's obvious. The imperial mage corps led by the archmage and the numerous Swordmasters of the Shanafel will be surrounding us; how could we be in danger? The ones we face will be in danger."

That's the problem right now.

The empire's elite forces, which the labyrinth's troops can't handle, plan to crush the small number of subordinates and allies!

We don't have to worry! They are the ones who should be worried!

"Is that how it's going to be……?"

"Of course. So we'll just watch from a safe distance and that's it."

The problem is that.

Assuming we capture Roswin, there is a high possibility that it would be the empire, not me, who will succeed. Then it would be impossible for me to obtain the information.

I obeyed Bertus's command to follow in case there was a way, but.

How can I handle this?

We were not in danger. I believed that no matter how many mages Cantus Magna had, they couldn't defeat the empire's elite forces.

For now, I had to return to the temple and relay the information as quickly as possible.

—---

There were many clues.

However, Charlotte suddenly said to Ellen.

“Today.”

“Let's stop for today.”

“Let's go back to the temple for now and cool our heads.”

Fear and trepidation flickered in Charlotte's eyes.

A reluctance to know something irreversible.

A desperate hope that it would remain a possibility for now.

Ellen and Charlotte felt the same complex emotions. Knowing how each other felt, Ellen and Charlotte decided to take the decisive final step later on.

The Statue of Rellia, or perhaps, Elena, at the Castle of Epiax.

They planned to visit the place tomorrow.

After returning to the temple, Ellen and Charlotte went back to their respective dormitories.

Even when one tries not to think about anything, thoughts inevitably come. Humans are like that.

However, since nothing is certain yet, they try not to be sure about anything.

Until something is confirmed and certainty is gained, it's as if nothing has happened.

But unconfirmed things can be frightening and terrifying.

That's why Ellen wanted to see Reinhardt.

Unable to stop, Ellen and Charlotte must find out more. And they will discover more.

So now.

If everything turns out to be just misunderstandings and illusions later, they don't know, but it might not be.

So.

Now.

Knock, knock

Ellen knocked on Reinhardt's door.

Having seen him leaving with Harriet, he might not have returned to the temple yet. Wondering when he would return, Ellen was about to turn away when…

Thump

“…Um."

"…”

Somehow, Reinhardt, with a slightly pale complexion, carefully opened the door.

"Why? Training? Today is not the day…”

Reinhardt seemed to be hesitant to train today, as if he had a bad feeling. Seeing Reinhardt's face, complicated thoughts boiled in Ellen's head.

She wanted to ask something right away, but fearing that it might make the situation irreversible, Ellen decided not to ask anything.

"May I come in?"

At Ellen's words, Reinhardt seemed a bit flustered but opened the door wide, as if it were okay.

Entering room A-11, Reinhardt's room, Ellen lightly sat on his bed.

Reinhardt seemed to be watching Ellen's every move, then he sat down in the chair in front of his desk.

"Here."

“…What?"

Pat, pat

Ellen patted the spot on the bed next to her.

"Can't you sit here?"

At Ellen's words, Reinhardt hesitated for a moment, then got up from the chair and sat down beside her.

For a while, Ellen just stared blankly ahead without saying anything.

What were the things Reinhardt couldn't tell her so far, and what were they really about?

Ellen and Charlotte stopped inflating the balloon, which was about to burst from being filled to its limit.

Just a little more.

One more breath, and the balloon would burst.

That's why, in this brief moment.

Because the balloon hasn't burst yet, they can still be together.

There are many questions.

Why did he help everyone so much, and why was he as gentle as he was rough?

Had he taken good care of them?

So, it might not be, Ellen still believes.

Her faith in Reinhardt is still strong.

Fiddling with her fingers, Ellen quietly says,

"What did you do today? I heard something happened at the royal palace…"

She had seen him leaving the temple with Harriet. And since she had heard from Charlotte as well, she had a rough idea of what Reinhardt had done today.

"Harriet seemed to be involved in the matter, so we looked around together to see if there was any information we could find…"

Right.

Like this.

There's no way the ever-attentive and caring Reinhardt, who always watches over everyone, could be up to something.

If that were the case, then Reinhardt wouldn't have to try so hard, so tirelessly. There would be no reason for him to put in all this effort. Therefore, it can't be him, as he wouldn't engage in something without a purpose.

The suspicion surrounding Reinhardt must be a mere illusion created by coincidental circumstances.

"Did you find anything out?"

"…There wasn't much more we could learn from being here. Well, what Harriet knew did provide some hints…"

"I see."

What had happened today?

What would happen tomorrow?

What would they eat tonight?

They had shared countless trivial conversations.

Forever.

They wanted to keep doing so forever.

Ellen turns her head towards Reinhardt. Reinhardt meets her gaze, albeit somewhat awkwardly.

Reinhardt is Reinhardt.

And Ellen is Ellen.

They can still be that way towards each other, for now.

"Reinhardt."

“…Yeah."

So, while they can still be themselves to each other.

Ellen wanted to do something she could only do now, something she wouldn't be able to do later.

Ellen carefully wraps her arms around Reinhardt's neck.

"!"

And their lips meet.

Ellen can vividly feel Reinhardt's body tensing up in her embrace.

After the brief kiss that seemed to last an eternity.

"I'm sorry…”

Ellen gently pulls away from Reinhardt, her lips slightly moistened, and quietly apologizes.

Reinhardt's eyes widen, more shocked by Ellen's sudden action than embarrassed.

"I just thought… if not now, I wouldn't be able to do it…”

Leaving only those words behind, Ellen exits Reinhardt's room.

Chapter 419

Ellen had come to see me, but I hesitated to tell her that I had decided to head to the Tomb of the Lich.

I couldn't involve her, especially since Harriet had already decided to tag along, which was making me uneasy. If I told her, Ellen would undoubtedly want to join us.

I wasn't sure whether Bertus would try to involve Ellen or not, but for the time being, I wished that she wasn't there.

As I was worrying about how to dodge the topic, Ellen suddenly made a move.

It seemed like she had something to say, but I never imagined she would suddenly kiss me.

Why did she do that? I wondered if there had been some change in her feelings, but Ellen left without giving a proper explanation, only apologizing.

The unfamiliar sensation lingering on my lips, and Ellen's expression and eyes flickered in my mind.

Even though this wasn't the time to think about such things.

I was curious as to what thoughts led her to act that way, and why she left without a word. However, this wasn't the time to dwell on those thoughts.

I immediately summoned Lucinil.

"Are you certain?"

As I quickly explained the situation to Lucinil, she responded with a serious expression.

"Roswin might not be Cantus Magna, but it's certain that the elite forces of the empire are heading to the Tomb of the Lich."

Even if it wasn't Cantus Magna, it was clear that the empire's most elite forces would be entering the Tomb of the Lich. The Quantum Maze might be breached, and the battle could escalate beyond what we could handle.

"I've decided to join the empire's forces and head to the Tomb of the Lich as well. Depending on the severity of the situation, we may need to decide whether to retreat or fight. We need to capture at least one magician from Cantus Magna. We must inform the Order and the Council quickly. And, please relay the information to Sarkegaar and Loyar."

"Understood."

With those words, Lucinil vanished into the mist.

We had tried to lure Cantus Magna, but the empire's elites had come along as well. Could this be our only chance to capture Cantus Magna, or should we retreat?

If the empire were to steal all of Cantus Magna or if they were to die before securing any information, the situation would be a tangled mess.

Moreover, there was a possibility that we could inadvertently help them complete Akasha.

I would be heading to the Tomb of the Lich with the empire's forces, today or tomorrow at the latest.

There was nothing to prepare.

I felt like praying.

But I didn't believe in gods.

And if there was a god, the true god of this world would be me, so I couldn't pray to anyone.

I was the only one in this world who couldn't pray to anyone.

I was a god.

And my power was the undead.

"Everything will be fine."

So, I prayed to myself.

"I have to make everything go well."

In the end, I had to do well.

Saturday night.

In a land ruled by eternal winter, an urgent council had been convened.

Originally, it was a principle that only members of the Vampire Council would gather around the round table in the conference hall. However, the nature of the Council had slightly changed, and due to the peculiarities of the current situation, there were others present besides the vampires.

The heads of the four Vampire Lord houses, excluding Antirianus who was in charge of the Lich's Tomb, were among the original members.

Eleris, Lucinil, Luruien, and Gallarush were there.

Even Sarkegaar, the servant of Valier.

Epinhauser, a member of the Black Order, was also present.

In fact, almost everyone except for Loyar had gathered.

"Are we sure that Roswin is a member of Cantus Magna?" Eleris asked.

Lucinil furrowed her brow. "We can't be certain. It's only circumstantial evidence at best. However, considering that he was able to pull off such a stunt in the palace and escape, all while being enchanted by numerous spellbooks, it would be strange if he wasn't part of Cantus Magna. And if it is Cantus Magna's intention, it means they have decided to concentrate their efforts on this matter. They must be focusing all their resources on the Lich's Tomb by now. Even if he's not, there's a chance that our bait will cause unnecessary trouble."

Gallarush nodded, arms crossed, as he listened to Lucinil's words.

"That's important, but what's even more crucial is the fact that the Empire's full force is headed there. The tomb will be breached, and it's doubtful whether we can rescue Cantus Magna's mages or not."

Just as the Temple's flag symbolized the goal of fostering exceptional talents regardless of their social status, Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps were filled with those who had been 'cultivated' in such a way.

It was the strongest group of humans, filled with individuals possessing exceptional talent, aptitude, and unwavering loyalty to humanity and the Empire.

No matter how powerful a secret organization with hidden strength might be, there was no way they could stand against the concentrated power of the extraordinary individuals gathered in one place.

And their goal was not to kill Cantus Magna's core members, but to extract them.

"We may be better off withdrawing instead of relying on such a slim possibility. If we lose too much in our attempt to grasp the clue of Cantus Magna, it may become irreversible," Luruien suggested that withdrawal might be the best option.

Initially, only Eleris, Lucinil, and Antirianus had fully agreed to cooperate within the Council.

Gallarush and Luruien had agreed to assist as much as they could, but they had no intention of sacrificing their lives for Valier.

So, they were more than willing to back out if the situation became too dangerous.

Luruien's judgment was not strange, considering that confronting Cantus Magna and the Empire simultaneously to uncover the truth of the inscrutable artifact known as Akasha was an insane act that crossed the line.

"I agree with Luruien's opinion. It would be one thing if we were only dealing with Cantus Magna, but taking on the empire itself would mean taking on too great a risk."

These were the words of Gallarush.

Upon hearing this, Sarkegaar, who took on the appearance of an ordinary human male, spoke in a worried tone.

"But didn't our master say that he is heading to that location?"

"Yes."

Lucinil nodded in response to Sarkegaar's words.

"Valier plans to join forces with the Imperial army and head to the tomb. So, Valier's safety shouldn't be in too much danger. However, we can't be certain how much of their power Cantus Magna will deploy. So, we can't be completely at ease. And even if we go there ourselves, it doesn't necessarily mean we'll be fighting directly. We can observe from a distance and intervene when it seems necessary. And well, if we capture Cantus Magna's mage, we can always exploit the situation later."

Lucinil stared at Sarkegaar.

"You're good at that kind of thing, aren't you?"

Lucinil and Sarkegaar had met a few times to communicate, so Lucinil already knew Sarkegaar was quite capable.

Sarkegaar excelled in camouflage and infiltration rather than direct combat.

"I'm skilled enough to be called an expert."

Epinhauser stared at Sarkegaar with confidence in his words, but he didn't say anything.

"The royal family would probably prefer to capture them all rather than kill them. It's not too late to find out why they did it and string them up. But since Cantus Magna has decided to give it their all, we must prepare thoroughly."

"Lucinil, are you going to that place?"

Luruien stared at the silver-haired girl with a puzzled look at Lucinil's words.

"Yeah, why not?"

"I don't understand why you're so devoted to his cause…”

At Luruien's words, Lucinil crossed her arms.

"A pretty boy always deserves a favor, and in my opinion, our Valier is pretty enough."

Lucinil grinned, and Luruien sighed heavily, unable to understand.

Somehow, Lucinil had ended up leading the meeting.

There were six people gathered in this place.

Lucinil, Eleris, Sarkegaar, Epinhauser, Luruien, and Gallarush.

They had decided that someone should monitor the situation at the Lich's tomb and intervene if necessary in case of an emergency.

"Anyway, I'm going. Anyone who doesn't want to go, raise your hand."

At those words, Luruien quickly raised her hand.

"…?"

Luruien was the only one with her hand raised.

“…Gallarush, have you become hard of hearing due to old age?"

At the words of the oldest vampire who was genuinely concerned about the aging of vampires, Gallarush answered plainly.

"I plan to go."

“…What?"

Like Luruien, Gallarush was not inclined to cooperate with Valier either. So it was assumed that he would not participate, but he was going along.

Luruien silently observed the sinister expressionlessness of Gallarush.

Gallarush was glaring intently at the wriggling Lucinil. It was clear that he was

worried about Lucinil and decided to follow along.

"Ah, this dishonest monster…"

"Quiet, big ears."

"What, what?! Big ears?"

"You're the one who called me a monster first."

Epinhauser simply watched the elf and orc vampire bickering.

In the end, everyone at the gathering, except for Luruien, decided to go to the scene.

"I'm not usually the type to get swept along… I'm really not…"

As everyone said they were going, Luruien hesitated, feeling that it would be strange if she were the only one left out. Moreover, she didn't want to miss out on a matter that shouldn't be decided like this, so she mumbled to himself.

"No, Luruien, you do have a tendency to get swept along."

It was Lucinil who spoke.

"Well, you certainly lean that way."

Eleris added.

"From what I've observed for a long time, you lack a backbone."

And finally, Gallarush's last words.

Due to their memories being reset every 200 years, the words of the Lord Vampires who had been observing Luruien for a longer time than she herself was more accurate.

Knowing this, the already pale elf vampire's complexion became even paler.

"Re… really?"

"Yeah, it's always like this. You think you have a strong will, but when you realize that you're actually a person who gets swayed back and forth without a backbone, you always react like this."

At Lucinil's words, Luruien's mouth fell open.

"I… have no backbone…?"

In reality, Luruien had no intention of cooperating with Valier, but when Gallarush decided to side with Valier, she reluctantly agreed to cooperate.

In the end, the decision was made for the backboneless Luruien to join the others in going to the Lich's tomb.

Chapter 420

"Something must be going on."

At Lydia's question, Eleris nodded her head.

Though Lydia couldn't attend the meeting, she could sense from Eleris's expression that something unusual was happening.

"Yes, there's an important matter. And there's a high chance it'll be a dangerous one."

Eleris lived a quiet life in the ancient snowy castle, but she was ultimately part of the force plunging the world into chaos. Thus, it was natural for her to be involved in dangerous situations. Lydia silently watched Eleris prepare to leave.

"I'll be away for a few days. There's enough food, but can you manage to eat well by yourself?"

"Huh? Oh… Of course. Don't worry about me."

Somehow, Lydia felt a bitter sweetness seeing Eleris, who was about to undertake a dangerous task, worry about leaving her behind.

When Eleris said she was going to face danger, she seemed to be preparing as if she were going on a casual stroll. It was no different from when she went out to buy groceries.

"I'll be back soon."

"Ah, yes…"

Lydia nodded in response to Eleris's brief farewell.

Eleris left the room.

Lydia didn't know exactly what Eleris was going to do, but she quietly watched her retreating figure.

She wanted to say something.

“…Stay safe."

"…?"

Surprised by the words that came from behind her, Eleris turned to look at Lydia.

Stay safe.

It was a simple phrase, but not something that would usually be exchanged between Lydia and Eleris. It showed how much Lydia had opened her heart to Eleris, and how worried she was.

"I will. I'll come back safely."

Eleris flashed a faint smile and bid Lydia farewell once more.

Lydia Schmitt silently watched the door Eleris had gone through.

What would it feel like to become a real family with Eleris?

Bound by blood.

If that happened, would she feel even warmer and safer than she did now?

Lydia Schmitt decided that when Eleris returned, she would earnestly ask to become her family.

Lydia had a hunch that Eleris would refuse, but she wanted to try nonetheless.

—---

Sunday, early morning.

Harriet and I headed to the palace.

I couldn't know how the council meeting would proceed or what decision the Black Order would make.

It would be best if our faction could capture the wizard of Cantus Magna, but if the imperial army succeeded, I would have to create a situation where I could interrogate them.

The worst-case scenario would be Cantus Magna's annihilation or letting them slip away.

Harriet seemed to have made her own preparations, carrying a scroll book. She appeared to have put a lot of effort into it.

After all, Harriet and I were just attendants, and the imperial army was in charge of the actual work. Bertus lured me into joining by promising an achievement, and Harriet's situation wasn't much different.

If the situation ever called for us to step forward, it would mean that things had already reached a point of no return.

There were no ceremonies or blessings for our departure.

The empire quickly gathered its elite forces at the imperial palace, and we set out to secure the Tomb of the Lich, while searching for the likely-headed Roswin.

Considering the murder that had occurred within the palace and Roswin's successful escape, he was a high-priority criminal to apprehend.

It didn't matter if Roswin wasn't there. It would be enough to confirm whether the rumored Archlich actually existed in the Tomb of the Lich.

If we couldn't find Roswin in the Tomb of the Lich, we would simply have to track him down using a different method.

The empire seemed to be considering whether Roswin might be connected to the Demon King.

The garden in front of the Imperial Palace Tetra.

Of course, neither Bertus nor the Emperor were present.

Saviolin Turner, the commander of the Shanafel, was present as the person responsible for the mission.

There were also about thirty knights of the Shanafel and about thirty mages from the Royal Mage Corps.

Scottla Kelton, whom we had encountered in Rajeurn last time, was also present.

All of these individuals were at the pinnacle of those considered superhuman.

Saviolin Turner looked at me and Harriet.

"Both of you, don't push yourselves too hard."

As if they had anticipated this, the mages and knights began to walk with Harriet and me at the center. We moved through the Warp Gate and then used Mass Teleport to immediately arrive at the scene in Darkland.

Saviolin Turner led the troops from the very front.

Things might not go as planned, but everything would be alright.

Everything had to turn out well.

A nervous Harriet grabbed my hand.

"You…"

But realizing that she had grabbed my hand out of her own fear, Harriet looked up at me, flustered.

It couldn't be helped.

I was the one sweating cold beads of sweat even more than her.

Harriet, scared and holding my hand, tightened her grip upon realizing that I was even more nervous.

As if she wanted to help me in any way possible, despite not being alright herself.

—---

At that moment.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

Ellen and Charlotte had stepped out of the temple.

Despite it being the peak of spring, both of them were dressed in very thick clothing.

It was only natural, considering that their destination was the polar region.

The two were planning to head to the fortress Epiaux today.

Charlotte, having been in the palace, was aware of the events that had transpired yesterday and what the empire was attempting to do now. She also knew that Reinhardt was heading to the Tomb of the Lich.

Nothing about Reinhardt was certain yet.

The suspicions about him were ultimately trivial: he had visited Elena's shop with a female student from the temple.

That's why Charlotte had taken no action.

She wouldn't be sure of anything until something was confirmed.

"Something strange seems to be happening."

"Is it because of the incident yesterday?"

"Yes."

From the royal palace murder case to the elite forces heading toward the Tomb of the Lich. And along with them, Reinhardt and Harriet de Saint-Owan join the journey.

Charlotte didn't tell Ellen about it.

"Let's focus on our task. Depending on the situation, what we're doing might be more important than their mission."

"…"

The actions of Ellen and Charlotte could potentially determine the fate of the empire.

Both of them hope that their task is of no importance.

"We need to check if the statue you mentioned in Epiaux is really there. We can think about the rest later."

"Okay."

At present, all magicians capable of using teleportation were engaged elsewhere. And Charlotte didn't want to bring anyone other than Ellen for this task.

Charlotte handed Ellen a scrollbook, identical to the one she was carrying.

"We'll take the gate to the northernmost part of the continent. From there, we'll use the teleportation scroll to enter. We'll return the same way."

"Alright."

Even though she had lost the competition, the First Princess was still the First Princess. Teleportation, a high-level magic, could easily be used through scrolls.

"Let's go."

The two hoped that their actions would amount to nothing more than a futile endeavor.

With that desperate hope, Ellen and Charlotte headed toward the warp gate.

—---

The two arrived at the northernmost part of the continent in no time.

After all, both Ellen and Charlotte had free access to the warp gates.

They used the teleportation scrolls to travel to the fortress of Epiaux, where no warp gate had been installed.

Whooosh

"Ugh… The weather is…”

At the entrance to the fortress, snow had piled up to knee height. The already accumulated snow had frozen solid at the ground level.

During their last group mission, Harriet had suggested touring the fortress, so Ellen and Reinhardt had explored Epiaux.

They knew it was a place haunted by wandering spirits, and within a space resembling a pantheon, there were seven statues.

Crunch, crunch

The two walked across the snow-covered ground.

"But what did you mean by that woman being a dragon?"

"She said she was a dragon. She was also hiding her true power."

“…And you believed that?"

Charlotte glanced at Ellen, as if asking if she believed such nonsense while trudging through the deep snow.

"At the time, I didn't believe her. But after seeing the statues here, I thought this place might have been a gathering spot for dragons long ago. It's quite a coincidence."

"Anyway, if the magician you met in Darkland is Elena…”

Charlotte bit her lip, unable to continue.

If Elena and Rellia were the same person, then Reinhardt would be extremely suspicious.

The empire didn't know what kind of fortress Epiaux was. They had merely managed it like an ancient historical site for a long time.

However, if the statue here truly resembled Elena, then things could take a different turn.

What on earth was the purpose of this fortress?

It was clear that the place was related to the Demon King, but how it was connected was unknown. So, to verify it with her own eyes, Charlotte had come to the Epiax.

"Whew."

Tuk tuk

After entering the castle, Ellen and Charlotte dusted off their snow-covered clothes. Just as the wind blew outside, the cold air circulated within the fortress as well.

Ellen seemed to have just remembered something and asked Charlotte.

"Afraid of ghosts?"

"Ghosts?"

As if to ask what she meant, Charlotte cocked her head.

"Ghosts appear here."

“…What?"

Charlotte furrowed her brow at the unexpected statement.

"They're not strong enough to do any harm, but ghosts have been wandering around. You know…”

Flash!

Just as Ellen was about to finish speaking, they saw a flash of light from one side of the dark fortress hallway.

It wasn't a natural phenomenon.

Ellen and Charlotte's expressions hardened.

It wasn't just that one time.

Flash! Flash!

Something like a divine light flashed throughout the hallways, emanating a white radiance.

“Sigh, just when Eleris left, it got tangled again…”

Someone's voice.

Ellen and Charlotte soon saw a figure emerging from the end of the hallway.

Naturally, they made eye contact.

"…?"

An unfamiliar woman with black hair was standing there.

The place where a statue resembling Elena was located.

Reinhardt had visited Elena's shop with the black-haired woman.

And now, the black-haired woman appeared before them.

Charlotte could not remember her.

However, Ellen had a good memory. She had watched the tournament more closely since she was a combat major.

She could clearly recognize the face from her memory.

Ellen was able to recall her as a participant in the Unrestricted Class Tournament.

6th year, Lydia Schmitt.

Olivia Lanze, who had forfeited the tournament finals.

Reinhardt, who had visited Elena's shop with the black-haired woman.

The Holy Knight lineage.

The nameless monastery.

Olivia Lanze.

Adriana.

The Demon King's raid.

Somehow.

Reinhardt, who seemed to know everything that night.

And then.

And then…

At some point.

He had called himself the Demon King.

Reinhardt's playful confession.

Various puzzle pieces began to fit together in Ellen's mind.

“…How? You two?"

Lydia Schmitt may not have known Ellen, but she recognized the face of the 1st Princess, Charlotte.

Two people who shouldn't have been there appeared in the council.

"Senior, let's talk."

Ellen slowly approached Lydia Schmitt.

With a stern expression, Lydia Schmitt slowly began to back away.

Chapter 421

"Seems there's less in here than we thought, huh?"

"It does appear that way."

Roswin remarked, and the Grand Duke responded in the spacious chamber.

There was no need to light a fire. After all, everyone in the room was a mage capable of summoning light on their own.

The dungeon exploration had been long, and everyone took turns to rest in the available space, spending a day doing so.

"Perhaps it was just the empty cart that made a racket. We don't see the magical tome that's been causing such a stir."

"Rather than not seeing it, it feels more like it has been deliberately hidden."

"I have the same thought."

Roswin was quite talkative.

The Grand Duke, on the other hand, only spoke when necessary.

And the woman was silent.

Luna moved at a leisurely pace. She would respond a beat late when Roswin or the Grand Duke called her. Most of the time, she would slowly nod or shake her head to their questions, hardly ever speaking.

There were no significant traps or labyrinth barriers like the ones outside.

However, they couldn't afford to be careless, so they proceeded slowly, which took a considerable amount of time.

The Grand Duke and Roswin both took the lead at different times.

The Grand Duke couldn't help but notice that Roswin was far from an ordinary mage. Although he spoke a lot, he was cautious in his actions and always seemed to be on guard.

However, the woman who introduced herself as Luna remained quiet.

She simply followed the group slightly to the side, neither taking the lead nor falling behind.

She did nothing.

She just trailed alongside the group with a slightly unhurried stride.

"Luna seems to be anything but ordinary."

"I agree."

The Grand Duke nodded in response to Roswin's words.

There were no ordinary people in the room, but the most extraordinary among them was Luna, who had yet to reveal anything.

Clad in an unremarkable outfit and a plain cloak, Luna attracted the awe and curiosity of the Grand Duke's mages.

Her abilities, intentions, and whether she was a friend or foe remained unknown.

Everyone was watching her elegant, unhurried steps, whether they realized it or not.

It wasn't fascination but fear mixed with awe.

Although the interior was excessively desolate, Luna appeared to be out for a casual stroll, occasionally brushing her fingers along the walls in the mysterious space.

In fact, she had not slept and had quietly walked around the chamber for the entire day. She would occasionally stop and gaze at something.

As if she was lost in deep thought.

"Let's move on. There's nothing special here, and it's not a place we should stay in

for long."

"Shall we?"

At the Grand Duke's signal, the mages prepared to depart, and Luna watched them before joining the group with her usual unhurried pace.

It was strange.

Despite her leisurely steps, she had never once fallen behind.

"Lady Luna seems to be quite an extraordinary individual," Roswin commented with a smile.

Luna, gazing in the direction they were to proceed, quietly replied, "If one looks at the world with an extraordinary perspective, can anything really be considered ordinary?"

"Even if we try to see it as ordinary, isn't it a fact that there are extraordinary beings?"

In response to Roswin's somewhat sarcastic question, Luna finally looked directly at him.

"Less ordinary than a being that is neither human nor has given up its humanity."

Her gaze was indifferent, neither hostile nor friendly.

“…Haha, is that so?" Roswin chuckled, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

'This one, is he not human?'

The Duke steadied his breath as he observed Roswin's cold smile.

He recalled the ancient teachings, warning against getting too close to anything peculiar.

He hadn't intended to exploit the mysterious power, but the fact that he had become involved with it remained unchanged.

'Sure enough, when one gets involved in mysterious affairs, mysterious things get tangled up.'

As the Duke walked on, he reaffirmed the truth of his ancestors' words.

The Duke had come in search of a tomb.

Hoping that the tomb of the stranger would not become his own.

"Let's go."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"…"

The Duke led his party.

—---

The tomb of the Lich was deep and vast.

However, both Roswin and the Duke shared a common observation: while the space was very large, most of it was empty. There were no traps or monsters.

"It seems like there used to be something here, not an empty space."

"That's how it appears."

It wasn't a discovery that required exceptional observational skills. There were numerous rooms and facilities in the dungeon, most of which were empty. But the scratches on the walls, the areas without dust—these traces indicated that there had been something in this space, but everything had been cleared away.

"It feels like everything was taken out and moved somewhere else… Why would they do that?"

"I have no idea. But it doesn't seem like it was plundered."

The feeling was not of mere looting, but of the entire space being thoroughly cleaned.

"Traces of traps were found, but they've all been disassembled."

The Duke's mages also diligently investigated the area, reporting their findings to him.

A Lich's tomb is a magical research facility. Traps are installed to kill or repel intruders who dare to enter such a place.

Yet the equipment was gone, and the traps were all disassembled.

"It's possible that they removed all the miscellaneous items to make sure those who broke through the labyrinth would be drawn straight here without being distracted."

“…And why would they do that?"

"I am not the owner of this place, so I have no way of knowing."

It made no sense that they had cleared everything away to ensure an undistracted path to the core.

However, it was hard not to agree with Roswin's words.

The party advanced slowly, ever wary of the possibility that their entry could be met with an ambush from an unexpected quarter. Given the complexity of the labyrinth that had unfolded before them, it would be foolish to underestimate the challenge at hand.

The sheer scale of the place, combined with their cautious movements, made for a long and arduous exploration.

As they spent days exploring, traversing underground rooms, corridors, and halls, the party eventually found themselves unable to proceed any further. The darkness had enveloped them, signaling that night had fallen.

“…How strange," Roswin hesitated, "It feels… different."

"I'm not sure if it's the right word, but it seems like it's been renovated or expanded…?"

Up until this point, the rooms and halls had given off a worn and aged aura, but from

here on, they appeared to be new additions, albeit still pristine. An endless staircase led them further down.

"We should be cautious," they agreed, and with a growing sense of certainty that they were delving into the heart of the dungeon, they descended ever downward.

How far had they gone?

"I think we've reached the deepest part," one of them surmised.

The heart of the dungeon was unassuming, yet grand. The light from the mage's conjured orbs struggled to illuminate the vast expanse.

With a snap of his fingers, a brilliant white light erupted from the ceiling, illuminating the entire chamber. It was a simple, massive space devoid of any patterns, decorations, or embellishments.

For a place rumored to lure people with rare spellbooks, it was not particularly menacing. It was a desolate and barren place that only managed to overwhelm with its sheer size.

In the center of the room, there were three wooden chairs.

They were not grand thrones of intricate woodwork, but rather, simple makeshift seats fashioned from logs and planks. Upon these humble chairs sat three figures: a person clad in a black robe, a skeleton wearing a gray robe, and an old man in a black suit and a bowler hat, leaning on a cane.

These figures gazed silently at the party that had intruded upon their space for the first time.

"Are they the masters of this place?" The Duke murmured.

Luna remained silent, simply watching the spectacle before them.

Then, suddenly:

"Antirianus…!"

With eyes bulging to the point of bursting, Roswin spat the name as if it were a curse.

"Oh, a young man who recognizes me."

"Of course… it was you!"

Gone was the composed and shrewd young mage they had known; now, Roswin emanated a sinister and foreboding energy.

With a cry, he declared, "It's because of you…!"

The old man rose from his chair, removing his hat in greeting.

"Who might you be, to recognize this old man?"

At the old man's words, Roswin lost all composure, grinding his teeth in frustration.

"For now," he said, and with a leap, he appeared right in front of the old man, who still wore that empty smile.

"Die!"

"Ho."

Rumble!

As Roswin reached out his hand, a torrent of magical power erupted from it and engulfed the aged mage.

Rumble!

The torrent of magical power that enveloped the aged mage collided with the chamber walls, creating an enormous vibration.

But.

"I recognize you."

With a single flick of his index finger, the aged mage who diverted the magical storm with a barrier looked at Roswin's furious, burning eyes and spoke.

"Surely, a worthy guest has arrived… I see."

Antirianus looked at Roswin.

"Lukren, is it you?"

Roswin clenched his teeth and shouted.

"Yes."

Roswin's eyes began to turn blood red.

"The captain himself has come. What happened to all those brave knights?"

"Don't pretend you don't know, Antirianus."

Roswin's hair, beginning to glow with a reddish hue, started to stand on end in all directions.

"You killed half of them and now you pretend ignorance!"

"Ah, well, I didn't kill all of them."

"Hoo… Hoo… Huaaaaaaak!"

Boom!

Enraged, a storm surged through Roswin's body, whipping the surroundings, creating fissures in the ground, and lashing the chamber walls.

The archmage and the mage squad held back the magical storm with barriers.

The torrent pouring from Roswin's body soon revealed his true form.

"Yes."

Antirianus, standing at a distance, smiled as he looked at Roswin.

"I thought the false rumors about Archlich might draw you in, and it turns out they did."

In human form, but with a pale skin and eyes seemingly flickering with red flames.

A pitch-black energy undulating throughout his body.

The archmage quietly observed Roswin, feeling an indescribable, formidable magical power.

There is no set form for something that exists only in legends.

However, the immense and sinister magical power emanating from that ominous being.

Oh, oh… This, this is… Archlich?

The weak muttering of the lich that had been blown away by the magical storm.

"It seems you didn't come searching for Archlich's tomb, but rather, you've been with Archlich all along."

This entanglement wasn't just a simple twist of fate.

The false rumors about Archlich had summoned the real Archlich.

As the Lord Vampire overcame sunlight, Archlich overcame his skeletal remains.

"Killing my comrades and fleeing, it was a good move, Antirianus. But after countless and immeasurable time, I have finally found you."

As there are vampires who have conquered the sun, there are liches who have conquered their lost flesh.

A being that reshapes the lost flesh with magical power.

"Now, it's time to pay the price."

Archlich, surrounded by immense magical power, reached out his hand to the aged mage.

"Die, Antirianus. We'll talk after that."

Archlich, the embodiment of impure magical power, thrust his hand down from above.

Crash!

With a single gesture, an immense pressure was exerted from above, creating fissures in the ground.

"It's going to collapse."

Luna, who had been silent for a long time, conveyed this one sentence to the Grand Duke.

-Crack

The Grand Duke watched intently as the cracks formed in the ceiling of the cavern.

He gazed at Luna in silence.

Though he feigned calmness to prevent confusion among his subordinates, the Grand Duke could not hide his astonishment that the wicked being from the legends had been accompanying them all this time.

However, Luna seemed to have known this from the beginning, as she acted nonchalantly and showed no signs of surprise.

Was the Archlich the problem?

Was it the person who effortlessly withstood the Archlich's attacks?

Or was it this woman who, despite witnessing such a spectacle, still maintained the same attitude as before?

The Grand Duke couldn't tell.

-Creaking

All he knew was that the ceiling of the cavern was collapsing.

Chapter 422

As we passed through the gate and later arrived near the Tomb of the Lich via mass teleportation, I could see a vast expanse of fog before us.

We refrained from entering hastily and assessed the situation first.

The Quantum Maze was not an invulnerable labyrinth. While the Royal Mage Corps might be able to navigate it, most adventurers would inevitably get lost and have to turn back.

There was no way to know where the Vampire Council and my allies might be.

We waited outside the labyrinth for the mages to finish their analysis without entering it.

Saviolin Turner relayed precautions to Harriet and me.

"Once we enter, I'll have you two move in the center. Do not act without my orders, and avoid direct confrontation with the enemy during combat. There should be someone with enough skill to protect you."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Both Harriet and I nodded tensely. It was only natural for her to be nervous, not knowing what lay within.

I couldn't be sure if Roswin was really inside. I hoped he was, and that we could capture at least one key member of Cantus Magna.

"We'll enter as soon as the labyrinth analysis is complete."

Since we had agreed to work together, Turner seemed to be taking every possible precaution.

So we waited outside for a long time after our arrival while the mages analyzed the labyrinth.

For a while, nothing happened, but it felt like our blood was drying up.

Late at night.

The analysis did not end until the deep white full moon had risen.

Under the moonlight, Harriet and I could only quietly observe the situation.

I wondered if this was how it felt to be restless and not know what to do.

It was only when the moon began to wane that we received a response from the mages.

"Captain! Something's happening!"

One of the mages analyzing the labyrinth shouted towards Turner.

"The fog is lifting!"

"What?"

The labyrinth analysis wasn't complete.

An anomaly had been detected in the area where the labyrinth was.

It was quite literal.

Since we were observing the vast foggy area from one side of the mountain range, we could see the majority of the enormous region.

However, the fog was gradually lifting.

I, for one, knew that the fog itself was functioning as the Quantum Maze.

Yet, the fog was dissipating.

That meant the labyrinth was being deactivated.

But why?

Had someone broken through the labyrinth?

Or had someone completely disabled the Quantum Maze?

Time provided the answer.

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrumble!"

"An… Earthquake?"

The ground began to tremble violently.

In an instant, the fog covering the mountain range vanished.

I hugged Harriet, whose face had turned pale.

"Rrrrrrrumble!"

"It's an earthquake! Everyone, protect yourselves! A landslide could occur!"

At Turner's frantic shout, everyone began to take action.

With a resounding crash, the tree fell. The wizards around us unfurled their magic. Wide-eyed, Harriet and I watched as the ground in the center of the labyrinth unnaturally rose.

Bulging.

For a moment, the earth rose like a rubber balloon.

-Boom!

A massive blue flash surged from the depths below, causing the ground to explode.

The magical explosion enveloped the world.

-Crackling!

The powerful barrier cast by the great wizards surrounding Turner and me protected us from the colossal shockwave.

—---

The ground sank.

I couldn't find any other way to describe it.

After the explosion, the surrounding terrain had collapsed.

As the nearby land sank, the ground crumbled, leaving the area like a vast antlion pit.

Fortunately, everyone present was a great wizard, capable of protecting not only themselves but also Harriet and me from such an explosion.

The labyrinth disappeared.

And the ground collapsed.

That meant those who had been wandering the labyrinth were either shattered by the explosion or buried under the debris, dead.

How many adventurers were lost in that labyrinth, searching for treasure? Hundreds? Thousands?

There was no way to know.

But without a great wizard to protect them, they were all undoubtedly dead.

As we landed on the fallen ground, we could see the center of the area, now clear of the mist.

Too far away to be visible to Harriet, and only a speck to me.

But one figure, shrouded in a sinister aura.

-Bang! Crash! Boom!

It was clear that it was engaged in some kind of battle.

"Prepare your formations! We're entering the scene!"

Savolin Turner, regaining her composure, shouted.

No matter what was happening, Savolin Turner had to suppress the situation.
Harriet squinted, possibly using a telescope spell.

"Ah…"

Harriet's lips trembled as she pointed at the scene.

Unable to believe her eyes, Harriet murmured blankly.

"Dad…?"

"What?"

Harriet grabbed my arm and screamed like a banshee.

"Ah, Dad is there! Dad is there!"

The Grand Duke of Saint Owan?

Why on earth was the Grand Duke here?

Could it be?

A chilling sensation ran through my body. Of course, I wasn't the only one astonished by the revelation.

"What are you talking about? The Grand Duke of Saint Owan is there?"

"Yes! I don't know why, but Dad is there!"

Harriet's lips were blue, and she trembled violently.

—---

-Growl

The Archlich, who had obliterated the ground with a massive magical explosion, stood tall, surveying the area.

The original owner of the labyrinth, the Lich, had vanished, unable to withstand the explosion.

The Grand Duke of Saint Owan and the wizards were unharmed.

The Archlich, also known as the leader of Cantus Magna, Lukren, turned his gaze elsewhere before confirming the safety of Antirianus.

'Who on earth is that woman?'

Despite the explosion, she stood there without a single hair out of place, merely observing the situation.

She maintained a neutral expression, simply watching the events unfold.

Who was this being?

Friend or foe?

Unable to determine her nature, Lukren had no choice but to be on his guard against the mysterious woman in their midst.

And under the moonlight, Lukren detected a subtle change in Antirianus's appearance.

Golden eyes with vertical slits.

Sharp fangs protruding between his pale skin and lips.

The message was clear.

"You've become a vampire, Antirianus."

"There are many ways to endure the passage of time. You've become a lich, and I've become a vampire."

Both were beings of legend.

However, the situation was dire.

Lukren looked up at the sky.

The time was night.

Vampires were creatures of the night.

"You didn't choose your timing well, Lukren."

With golden eyes, Antirianus raised both of his hands.

-Whooosh!

The Seven Great Houses of Vampire Lords.

Antirianus, the Lord of Saturday.

The ground surged and engulfed Archlich.

"Now, it's time to uncover the truth of Akasha."

"What…?"

-Boom!

The mound of dirt that swallowed Lukren compressed in an instant, turning into rock, and then crystallizing.

Antirianus smiled as he gazed at Lukren, trapped inside a prison made of crystal.

"Ah."

Luna murmured softly.

"Saturday, huh…"

The Grand Duke heard her low voice, but he couldn't understand what she meant.

"Maybe we came to the wrong place…"

Luna took a step forward.

In the next moment.

The Grand Duke saw the woman vanish suddenly.

She had merely taken a slow step, just as she had before.

But in that instant, the Grand Duke saw the woman appear behind the old priest.

Whether it was magic or physical ability, he couldn't tell. All he knew was that with a single slow step, the woman had closed the distance behind the old priest.

"Who are you, milady?"

Without turning around, the old priest spoke with a faint smile on his lips.

"I have a question."

Luna said calmly.

"Where is the Archdemon?"

Despite the unexpected question, Antirianus wasn't flustered.

"How did you come to learn of such a story?"

"That's not important."

With another step, the woman appeared not behind but in front of the old priest.

Bathed in moonlight, she asked Antirianus,

"Where is the Archdemon?"

To her serene inquiry, Antirianus responded with a smile.

"Heh heh. I'm not sure which one you're referring to…"

A glint appeared in the old vampire's eyes.

"But if you mean it, you'll have to bend a little…”

The old priest reached out to the woman.

"I cannot simply disclose such information to a stranger."

-Swish!

As Antirianus extended his hand, Luna vanished like a mirage and reappeared several steps behind.

“Again, though you may be carefree, I am not in such a state.”

Creaking -

A crack formed in the crystal prison behind Luna.

But that wasn't all.

Luna could see, from afar, the approach of wizards and knights.

"Hmm."

Indeed, there was no time for idle conversation.

Grating -

"Antirianus, your petty tricks have increased."

The Archlich, who had shattered the crystal prison with his power, exhaled a breath filled with hatred.

The battle between The Archlich and the Lord Vampire.

And the Swordmaster and Great Mage Brigade were approaching the scene.

Luna closed her eyes for a moment.

As she took a single step, she disappeared without a trace.

With the seething Archlich in front of him, Antirianus showed not a hypocritical smile as before, but a bizarrely twisted one.

"How strange, Lukren."

Antirianus looked at the elite soldiers of the empire charging towards him.

"Why have you come to such a place alone?"

Pop! -

One by one, new figures appeared beside Antirianus.

Beings clad in robes.

Reinforcements from the Black Order and the Vampire Council had arrived.

"Do you have that much confidence?"

The empire's elite soldiers approached.

It would become a chaotic battle, and someone would surely die.

The goal of the Vampire Council and the Black Order was to subdue Archlich and flee.

And for the elite soldiers of the empire, annihilation was their objective.

The Black Order and the Vampire Council.

Cantus Magna.

And the empire's elite soldiers.

The three-sided battle was about to begin.

At the forefront of the empire, Saviolin Turner arrived at the standoff.

"The situation is quite intriguing."

She stared at the group of robed figures, Archlich, and the Archduke and Mage Brigade behind them.

'The Archduke is irrelevant.'

Although she could not understand why he was there, Turner quickly assessed the situation as she saw the Archduke retreating with his troops.

The superhuman who had surpassed even heroes.

The knight, who rightfully deserved the title of the world's strongest, looked down at Archlich with a lofty stance.

"Well, I suppose we just have to kill all the suspicious ones."

Saviolin Turner pointed her Sword Tempesta at the enemies.

The details of the situation were not important to her.

She had come to destroy the enemies of the empire, and she would simply carry out that mission.

—---

The empire's elite soldiers charged into the eye of the storm.

The scale of the battle had grown immensely. A considerable number of robed figures, including Antirianus, had appeared.

It was clear that the Black Order's assassins and the Lord Vampire's kin had joined forces.

The Lords, including Lucinil, must have been involved in that situation as well.

Their target would be Roswin, but the clash with the empire's elite had already begun. The empire wouldn't be able to tell who was the enemy. They hoped as few people as possible would be hurt, but that was impossible.

Someone was going to die.

Harriet and I remained in our places, watching the scene unfold. It wasn't a situation we could intervene in.

In the midst of the battle was Harriet's father, Duke Saint Owan.

Harriet, trembling in a situation she couldn't understand, did something.

Then, from a distance, Duke Saint Owan and his troops began to move towards us, avoiding the fight.

They used short-range spatial teleportation in quick succession.

-Whoosh!

In no time, Duke Saint Owan and his army were close, and he roughly embraced Harriet.

"Father!"

-Crash!

"Daughter, how did you get here…!"

He then looked at me, standing next to Harriet, and widened his eyes in surprise.

"Reinhardt, you too?"

Since Duke Saint Owan might know about my affiliation with Cantus Magna, I had no choice but to be cautious.

-Rumble! Roar!

At the presumed site of the battle where Antirianus was, fierce torrents of magical power boiled, accompanied by lightning and thunderous noise.

With the addition of the troops led by Saviolin Turner, a veritable whirlwind of incredible combat ensued.

"Why is Father here? What are you doing?"

Harriet, still trembling and embracing the Duke, asked.

"I came to deal with dangerous magic that has been discovered. But it seems there are even more dangerous beings than I anticipated."

I couldn't tell if the Duke's words were true. However, it seemed his thoughts had changed upon discovering Harriet here.

"We must leave this place first. Let's talk later."

"Y-yes…"

Seemingly intent on securing Harriet's safety before anything else, the Duke released his embrace and looked around.

"Your Grace, the flow of mana is not normal. A long-range spatial teleportation barrier has been deployed throughout the area."

One of the Duke's subordinates reported.

Originally, they had come to this place to capture Roswin, leading elite forces. Hence, the Royal Mage Corps had analyzed the labyrinth and even set up a spatial teleportation barrier in this vast area.

It wasn't an easy task, but the Royal Mage Corps made the impossible possible.

"Then, let's move using short-range spatial teleportation. Daughter, follow the troops. Since Reinhardt can't use spatial teleportation, I'll escort him personally."

The Duke intended to send Harriet ahead and personally escort me.

"No, we don't know what will happen. Go with Harriet. I'll follow."

Though the Duke seemed intent on protecting me, I was better off alone in the current situation. I might need to make contact with my forces, including Eleris, depending on what transpired next.

If the Empire succeeded in subduing Roswin, I might have to steal him back or something.

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes, please go ahead."

The Duke, concerned for my safety but also wary of problems that might arise from sending Harriet alone, agreed to my suggestion.

"Reinhardt… Be careful…"

"Alright, you go first."

With a nod, the group of wizards, including Harriet and the Archduke, began to move away quickly through short-range teleportation.

I should follow them based on the situation, but I have no intention of doing so just yet.

It seems certain that the one engaged in the battle there is Cantus Magna. At the point when the Archduke left the fight and came this way, I can't help but think that he might not be on the same side as them.

So why was the Archduke with someone like that?

Is the one causing chaos over there really Roswin?

What if the Empire kills him instead of suppressing him?

As I turned to climb to higher ground to observe the battle, I noticed someone standing on a hill with crumbled ground. I had no idea when that person arrived.

"…"

A woman with a cold expression stood, bathed in moonlight, looking down at me.

She stared at me without moving.

To me, this woman did not seem unfamiliar at all.

If Ellen were to grow up…

The woman looked like an adult version of Ellen as if my imagination had become reality.

With a light step, she took one stride and suddenly appeared in front of me as if she had leaped through space.

"!"

A small pendant necklace usually concealed by a lavender case.

She held my necklace in her hand.

As the case shattered into pieces, the red gem inside was revealed.

"The Flame of Tuesday…"

She gazed at me.

She identified the Flame of Tuesday the moment she saw it.

"Where did you get this?"

Her tone was gentle, but there was no warmth in it.

"Wh-who… Who are you?"

She kept her eyes fixed on me and put my necklace down, just staring at me.

"If the answer is difficult, I suppose I should ask another question."

I felt a suffocating pressure, though nothing had happened.

"Where is the Archdemon?"

After finishing her question, she stepped back.

With a crash, a blue magic spear landed where she had been standing.

With a whoosh, someone's figure appeared in front of me.

"Eleris!"

"Step back, Your Highness!"

Had Eleris been watching the fight without intervening?

Observing the situation, Eleris stepped in when it seemed I was in danger.

The woman with black hair looked at Eleris.

"You've arrived. Master of the Flame of Tuesday of the seventh night…"

"…"

"The ancient Archdemon."

At her words, my thoughts seemed to freeze.

"And the boy who possesses the Flame of Tuesday, though he is not a vampire…"

She looked at me.

"The boy protected by the Archdemon…"

I don't understand what this woman is talking about.

However, it seemed as though she had reached a conclusion based on the fact that I possessed the Flame of Tuesday.

"Surely, you must be the last Archdemon."

Eleris and I didn't know who the woman in front of us was, but she had identified us instantly.

"Who are you?"

With an expression full of hostility, Eleris stared at the woman.

He still could not comprehend what she had said to him as she looked at him.

"Luna."

Taking a few steps back, she continued to gaze intently at Eleris.

"The Lord of Sun and Moon, Luna Artorius."

She slowly raised her right arm.

In that moment, something unbelievable happened.

"Although it is against our doctrine to interfere in the affairs of mortals…"

As if the laws of the world had been overturned, the full moon she held up suddenly began to grow in size.

The moon, now ten or perhaps twenty times larger than normal, filled the world with a chilling light.

He could not understand what was happening, not in the slightest.

"I do not wish to lose my child a second time."

She reached out towards the enlarged moon. In her hand, seemingly swallowed by the moonlight, something appeared.

In her grasp was a crescent-shaped weapon, as if the very moonlight had taken form.

What was this ancient archdemon, and what did it mean to be the Lord of Sun and Moon?

He didn't know.

But the outcome was laid before him.

Ellen's mother intended to kill him.

Chapter 423

-Clash!

Luna's swing of her Moonlight Crescent Blade collided with the blue magical sword summoned by Eleris.

"...!"

However, just by touching it, the moonlit blade shattered Eleris's blue magical sword.

It was difficult to accept the fact that Eleris was an Archdemon, but what I saw was that Eleris was not only skilled in magic but also excelled in close combat.

-Crash! Clang! Screech!

Eleris summoned a sword made of magical energy and engaged in a battle with Ellen's mother.

It was surprising that Eleris had considerable skill in close combat, but Ellen's mother, Luna, overwhelmed even that.

That wasn't all.

The abnormally enlarged moon's appearance was beyond any illusion.

Was it even magic to begin with?

And the Crescent Blade, seemingly drawn from the enormous moon, emitted a faint, chilly moonlight.

Above all, the movements of Ellen's mother, Luna Artorius, were peculiar.

It was hard to find a way to describe them.

Luna Artorius had a human form, but she didn't move like one.

"…"

She didn't run, charge, or perform any conventional swordplay movements like striking with force. It didn't seem like there was great power behind each motion either.

However, Eleris was utterly unable to respond to her slow movements.

Attacking would mean hurting Ellen's mother.

But such concerns were unnecessary. I knew all too well that intervening in that situation would be tantamount to a suicidal act.

-Clang! Scrape!

Each time Eleris's summoned magical sword met the moonlit blade, it shattered into pieces, forcing Eleris to continue summoning more swords.

Eleris struggled to fend off the seemingly slow strikes.

-Bang! Crash! Clash!

After dozens of exchanges, Eleris was merely focused on retreating.

It was an unbelievable spectacle that Eleris's tremendous close combat skill was so easily surpassed by Luna Artorius.

Slow yet fast, Luna Artorius attacked with a sensation that seemed to transcend perception.

Struggling to hold on, Eleris, at a considerable distance, spoke.

"I don't know who you are, but… We don't need to fight."

Eleris, of course, had no choice but to know that Luna Artorius was Ellen's mother.

However, Luna slowly shook her head.

"Archdemon. No one in this world desires to fight."

"The last Demon War was not born out of the desires of demons and humans, but out of mutual fear."

"All conflicts arise in such a manner."

Luna Artorius, wielding the Moonlight Crescent Blade, slowly walked towards Eleris.

"Whatever you all want, it has nothing to do with me. It doesn't matter what the previous Demon King wanted or what he tried to do."

"I could not determine whether the previous Demon King, Valier, was good or evil, and I still don't know. Moreover, I don't care."

"However, the existence of the Demon King sparked a great war, and that war ultimately resulted in the death of my son."

"Even now, I don't know whether you are good or evil. You may be good, and the humans may be evil. Or perhaps, both of you may be good, or both evil. Even the actions of my son, who killed the Demon King, may have led to an ultimately evil outcome. But none of this is important."

"What is important is that fear, not desire or greed, is what leads to conflict."

"Fear between Darkland and humans gave birth to the great war that took my son's life."

"The fear of the current Demon King will give birth to another conflict, and this time, it may take away my daughter as well."

"I don't know what you want, nor do I know what you are trying to accumulate through these actions. But it doesn't matter even if I knew."

"Your mere existence is a symbol and embodiment of fear. As long as you exist, your existence alone will lead to conflicts, and my daughter will be caught up in them."

"Like all other conflicts rooted in fear, I am no different."

"I fear that you will take my daughter away."

"So, it is not for some trivial reasons like good and evil or the legitimacy of existence.

It's because my daughter is precious to me that I intend to kill you."

"An action borne from simple fear, beyond good and evil."

"As a mother."

"I want to protect my remaining child."

Whether I am Ellen's friend or whatever, what I truly want doesn't matter.

Ellen's mother believes my mere existence is already a seed of conflict, so she intends to kill me.

Neither persuasion nor sincerity will work.

Luna Artorius speaks with the moonlight behind her.

"So, die."

Shwick!

In the blink of an eye, she had crossed the distance and appeared right before Eleris.

Her movement was slow, but she traversed space so swiftly that Eleris had no chance to react.

Swoosh!

"Ugh!"

Eleris, struck in the chest by the Crescent Moon Blade, was thrown back, rolling several times on the ground.

"Ugh… ugh…"

Though it seemed as if she had avoided a fatal blow by somehow putting up a barrier, Eleris clutched her chest and gasped for breath.

"Kuh! Cough!"

Cupping her mouth, Eleris coughed up blood.

Though she hadn't been impaled by the sword, her body seemed to have been damaged just from the impact.

Once again, Luna Artorius took a step forward.

If she crossed space again.

Eleris would die.

Can I do it?

Can I stop her?

As numerous thoughts tangled in my head, my actions outpaced my thoughts.

Swoosh!

In the next moment, I had already summoned Alsebringer and attacked Luna Artorius before she could take another step.

Although I was repelled by the tremendous resistance when I attacked, she narrowed her eyes as she looked at the sword in my hand.

“…Alsebringer?"

For the first time, an expression appeared on her face.

Luna Artorius does not know me. However, she must have heard my story from Ellen.

Ellen would have told her mother about what kind of person I am.

She must have also heard that I am the master of Tiamata.

And she must have known that I, as the master of Alsebringer, became known to the world.

The expression on Luna Artorius's face hardened as she pieced together the puzzle

of her thoughts.

"Could it be… you are Reinhardt…?"

It was inevitable that I had to reveal it, as it was clear that only a sacred artifact could withstand the Moonlight Crescent Moon.

It was not good for her to know that I was Reinhardt.

"Did you toy with my daughter all this time?"

Naturally, such a reaction was bound to occur.

Until now, she had been moving slowly, but her eyes sparkled as she sprang towards me.

Swish!

"!"

Clank!

"Ugh…!"

A single strike.

I endured it, but my wrist broke and Alsebringer slipped from my hand.

"Did you find that amusing, Archdemon?"

Luna Artorius's eyes were filled with murderous intent.

She must have thought I was toying with Ellen's heart.

If she found out that the Reinhardt Ellen spoke of was actually the Demon King, her thoughts would inevitably lead to such a conclusion.

That's why Luna Artorius, who had tried to kill me emotionlessly, was now feeling anger.

Alsebringer slipped from my grasp and my chest was wide open. Whether she thrusts her sword or twists my neck, I will die in the next moment.

Both I and Eleris will die.

Is this how I die, at the hands of Ellen's mother, when I came here to capture Cantus Magna?

However, was it fortunate that her anger was provoked?

Thump!

"Urgh…!"

She grabbed my neck with her left hand and lifted me into the air. Her eyes, filled with rage, stared at me.

Her right hand held the moonlit sword, which emitted a dangerous light.

"Archdemon, why did you play with my daughter's heart?"

She glared at me. With just a little force on her grip, my neck would snap. Magic Body Strengthening, Word Magic, and self-suggestion were all useless.

At least equal to, if not greater than, Saviolin Turner

This absolute being could treat my life as less than that of a fly.

"Is this your revenge? Did you gain anything by mocking the heart of the sister of the one who killed your father? Is this your pathetic revenge? Just this kind of act?"

She could only think of it that way.

It would be unfathomable for her to understand how the son of the Demon King could meet and grow close to the younger sister of the hero.

Luna Artorius, who seemed to lack some human qualities, could not abandon her humanity as a parent and was trying to kill me.

And so, there was no way she could not think like this once she found out the truth

about my relationship with Ellen, which could only be a deep wound to her.

That all my actions were for the sake of revenge.

"Did you enjoy imagining the pain my daughter would suffer when she learns the truth? Do you think you'll have won if you die by my hand here, knowing that your death will bring sorrow to my daughter as well? Why? Why to my daughter, who is not part of the empire, the royal family, or even humanity… Why to my daughter…!"

Gulp.

"Speak, Archdemon."

Unable to fully control her emotions, the boiling rage in her eyes intensified, and the grip of her left hand around my throat grew tighter.

Revenge?

For someone like me who holds no grudges, to take such revenge?

In reality, that could never be revenge.

And so, in Luna Artorius's eyes, there was as much rough suspicion as there was anger.

As the choking pain tightened, threatening to break me.

I barely managed to lift my broken hand and grasp the hand that held my throat.

"So… is it not allowed?"

It's not like it's not allowed.

This can't possibly be revenge.

You don't understand my actions either.

"Is it not allowed… for me to… like your daughter… just a little…?"

"…What?"

So what?

In the end, it was just a simple reason: I liked her.

That's the only reason, as plain as it can be.

Luna Artorius's grip weakened, surprised by my words.

I desperately pushed her grip away and shouted.

"Yes… I'm the Demon King, but I like your daughter! So what! What are you going to do about it!"

"Uh… what?"

Following her anger, I saw Luna Artorius's bewildered expression as well.

Chapter 424

I was so astonished that Luna Artorius, who had always been like an impenetrable wall and somehow seemed inhuman, let go of the hand grasping my collar in surprise.

-Thunk

"Ugh… Damn…”

I drew a sharp breath from the intense pain in my shattered wrist.

Eleris, still unable to recover from the shock, laid on the ground and looked at me with difficulty.

Though it wasn't the time for that, Eleris was also flustered by the situation.

Luna Artorius gazed down at me, who had crumpled to the floor.

"Are you telling a pathetic lie just to save your life at this moment?"

"If you want to believe it's a lie, then believe that."

-Swish

I summoned Tiamata and unleashed my divine power.

Rage, the ingredient needed to use Tiamata.

Naturally, there was no reason not to be angry when Ellen's mother threatened to take my life.

The divine power healed my wrist.

I staggered to my feet and put some distance between her and me.

"If you want to kill me and be hated by your daughter for the rest of your life, go

ahead."

"…"

At the absurdity of my threat, Luna Artorius stared at me silently.

"Ellen doesn't know you're the Demon King."

"That's right, she doesn't know. I don't want her to know, and she probably wouldn't be able to accept it."

"Even if you truly… love my daughter, the two of you cannot be together…"

"Interfering too much in your child's life isn't good."

Somehow.

It didn't seem like the right time for this conversation.

My life was hanging by a thread, and I couldn't possibly face her, so I just gave up.

I didn't know, but I had to spit out everything I had on my mind before I died, so I wouldn't feel wronged.

"We'll handle our own affairs."

I aimed Tiamata at Luna Artorius.

"So, please step back, mother."

"Wh-what did you call me?"

I wondered how it felt for the Hero's mother to be called 'mother' by the Demon King.

I wasn't sure, but her face looked perplexed, unable to laugh or cry.

However, that was only for a moment, as Luna Artorius's expression turned icy.

"Who said I'm your mother? I never acknowledged you…"

"I'm a person with manners. It's rude to call the mother of the person I love an 'auntie.' I don't know what the future holds. And I can't call you my mother-in-law either. We haven't gotten that far, so I call you 'mother.' What else would I call you?"

"…"

Once again, Luna Artorius's expression became complicated.

Though I couldn't do anything with power or swords, I could sense her mental damage in real-time.

What is this guy saying?

Why do I have to listen to this from the Demon King?

It seemed as if she was thinking that.

How about this?

Is it working?

Can I distract her and retreat somehow?

"Also, I only learned today that Eleris, lying over there, is the ancient Archdemon or whatever. So, if you think about it, Eleris would be like a distant ancestor of mine, right?"

I don't know what that means, but assuming it's true, Eleris would be my ancestor.

"Mother, what should I do if I beat your relatives as if I were beating a dog?"

"Why do I have to listen to such nonsense!"

"No, I'm just answering your question as it is!"

"Th-this… this doesn't make any sense…!"

It seems that just like Ellen, when she gets angry after holding it in, she explodes.

"Mother, you said you're not interested in the matter of good and evil. You're not

interested in what I want to do or what I want."

"You said that you're trying to kill me by breaking the law, all because of your daughter."

"I like her. You might not believe me, but that's the truth. What can I do about it?"

"Choose, Mother. Either kill me here and be hated by your daughter for the rest of your life."

"Or back down quietly for now."

Luna Artorius was taken aback by the situation where I, surpassing the hierarchy of power, threatened her instead.

If she tries to kill me, I can't stop her.

The roar of the distant battle seemed close, but if everyone in that place tried to kill me, would that be possible?

I don't know.

But Luna Artorius regained her original expression and stared at me quietly.

She must be seriously considering my words about liking Ellen.

Beyond whether it's true or false, if it is indeed true, she would be pondering what she should do.

In the end, she slowly lowered the hand holding her sword.

A tender emotion rose in her eyes once again.

"Your feelings… it would be better if they were false."

"…"

"If what you say is true, then all I can see… is a future where my daughter becomes… more miserable because of it… Why… do you… love my daughter… There's no need to…"

A deep sadness could be felt in her gaze.

"Wouldn't it be my duty as a mother to end everything here, with you dead and everything still unfinished… before a small misfortune turns into a greater one, before my daughter is broken… Isn't it right to stop all this?"

"I can't accept you either."

"There's no way my daughter, who has been deceived by you until now, can accept you."

The hero and the demon king.

My affection for Ellen can only bring future misfortune to both Ellen and me.

If Ellen and I must fight each other later on, that will surely be the case.

So Luna Artorius asks if it would be better to stop everything here if my love for Ellen is true.

She didn't make that decision.

She's asking for my opinion.

I already felt her intent to kill me has been broken.

Yes.

Now that Ellen's mother knows, let's not postpone the tragedy any longer.

"Whatever, let's tell her."

“…What?"

"Since you already know, Mother, there's no point in hiding it anymore. I don't think Ellen will understand, but… It'll be hard for her to accept, but…”

I'm scared.

Up until now, I had been deceiving her, continuously postponing the ever-growing

consequences of my actions. Ellen would, of course, feel betrayed and might not be able to accept me.

"Do you mean you would risk having my daughter killed because you don't want to be killed yourself?"

"Yes."

At my words, her expression hardened once more.

"I suppose it's a relief to be so honest."

“…You're a strange one, aren't you?"

Hearing her words, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Ellen's told me that many times as well."

A strange one.

It was a phrase I had always heard.

She stared at me intently, as if trying to read my mind from my eyes.

"I love my daughter, but I can't understand why I should spare you, who will undoubtedly bring her the greatest misery…”

However, the moonlit sword in her hand vanished.

It seemed as if she had read not my emotions but an ominous fate.

"But… if killing you would make my daughter unhappy… rather than giving her a wound that cannot be erased by a parent's hand… her own choice might be… better, at least…”

She gently touched my cheek with her hand.

"Should I continue to leave my daughter's affairs to her, as I have done so far? To let the world's matters be the world's matters, and my daughter's matters be her own…”

Her hand, which had tried to kill me just moments ago, was now so warm it was heartbreaking.

After a long silence, she pulled her hand away from my cheek and took a few steps back.

As she reached towards the sky, the moon, which had grown immense, returned to its original size.

What kind of power was that?

I didn't know, and I felt that I might never know.

"Archdemon… no, Reinhardt."

“…Yes."

She called me by my name.

"I know it's a meaningless thing to say, but…”

She stared at me.

"Don't make my daughter sad."

Luna Artorius had tried to kill me not because I was a demon king but because I was a threat to her daughter, and in the end, she couldn't kill me because I was connected to her daughter's unhappiness.

"I'll do my best."

“…It seems you know it's impossible as well."

I didn't know if Ellen would accept my confession.

But I had decided to do so.

As she had done so far in battle, she took a single step forward without a word.

-Whoosh

And just as she had done before, she disappeared as if melting into the moonlight, nowhere to be found.

As if she had never been here in the first place.

It felt like I had been manipulated by a mirage until now.

Luna Artorius was gone.

Only then could I focus on what truly needed my attention.

"Eleris!"

“…Your Highness."

Eleris, who had somewhat recovered, struggled to her feet and leaned on me.

"I'm glad you're safe, but… what on earth is going on?"

"Indeed…”

It wasn't a victory from battle, but rather, I had driven away my would-be killer, who happened to be my mother-in-law, with the mere mention of my love for her daughter.

The situation was so absurd that both Eleris and I couldn't help but feel a little dumbfounded.

-Kwakwakwang!

Far away, the explosive sounds of battle were raging.

It was only natural not to notice the anomaly that had occurred here, as a fierce battle was taking place.

And then,

"Reinhardt!"

When I didn't follow, Harriet, who had turned back, called out to me as she ran

towards me with the Archduke.

"Suddenly the moon grew larger, and this… uh… who is that person?"

Of course, both Harriet and the Archduke couldn't help but show a puzzled look as they took turns looking at me and Eleris, who I was supporting.

It's because they had been away for a while and came back to find myself supporting a completely different person.

They didn't know who Eleris was.

I wondered if I should explain that she was a wounded person we found nearby when, at that moment.

-Krrrrrrrr

The already dark night sky was shrouded in even deeper darkness, forcing us to naturally look up at the sky.

"What is… this?"

Harriet murmured with a pale face.

Just a while ago, the moon had grown dozens of times larger, casting a cool moonlight all around.

But this time, something different had happened.

It was as if someone had deliberately distorted the middle of the night sky. No, rather than distorted, it was as if someone had forcibly ripped the center of the night sky apart.

There was a huge, dark crack in the torn night sky.

It was a bizarre sight, as if the glass window of the night sky had shattered, revealing the abyss within.

The Archduke, myself, Eleris, and Harriet couldn't help but stare blankly at the sudden second strange weather phenomenon.

The enormous crack that had formed in the night sky was just the beginning.

From that abyss, hundreds of beams of light came pouring down.

We all knew it wasn't a burning beam of light or a flash.

It was the light of falling objects burning as they rubbed against the air, originating from that abyss.

The light of shooting stars.

"A meteor shower…?"

Not just one, but hundreds of meteorites began pouring down towards the ground.

"Magic that only exists in myths… How…?"

The Archduke muttered in a daze.

There was no time to think about whether such magic existed in reality or not.

There was only one person who could use such magic, as if telling everyone to die.

Roswin.

It must be the magic he had cast.

Chapter 425

"We must flee!"

Eleris's cry snapped me, the Archduke, and Harriet out of our stupor.

Yes, escape.

If any of the falling meteors were of a seriously colossal size, we would have to worry about a planetary-scale catastrophe. However, even if they were not that large, it was clear that a tremendous disaster would sweep away everything in its path.

Where to escape and how to do so?

Long-range teleportation was impossible due to the barrier, and even if it were possible, there wouldn't be enough casting time. With hundreds of burning meteors raining down from the sky, tearing the earth apart, how could we possibly avoid them?

Could a barrier protect our bodies from the shockwave of the falling meteors?

Harriet clenched her teeth.

Not knowing what to do, but feeling compelled to do something.

A blue magical aura began to boil throughout Harriet's body.

Yes, casting magic as quickly as possible in this desperate situation was something only Harriet could do.

But how could one respond to this situation?

-Whoooom!

Countless rune symbols, as well as Harriet's necklace, were emitting intense light.

-Click

Not one, but five power cartridges.

All of them discharged fierce magical energy, replenishing Harriet's power.

Teleportation was impossible, but with the assistance of the power cartridges, could she use it? Was she trying to break the barrier and use mass teleportation instantly, moving us to the outskirts?

-Whoooom!

I saw the largest of the hundreds of falling meteors suddenly vanish.

A pitch-black circular rift had appeared in the meteor's trajectory, which I could see clearly.

Harriet had opened a portal the size of the meteor in its path, sending it somewhere else.

One meteor vanished.

"Ugh…"

Harriet continued casting her magic, teeth clenched, and sweat pouring down her face.

Following the disappearance of the largest meteor, the hundreds of other falling meteors one by one lost their light and vanished.

Harriet created portals in the sky.

Instead of withstanding the meteor impacts, she sent them elsewhere.

One by one, and then in dozens, the falling meteors disappeared before reaching the ground.

She calculated the trajectory of the hundreds of falling meteors and opened portals in their path.

A magic of overwhelming destruction, and a meticulously calculated response from a magical genius.

I realized I had underestimated the greatest magical genius in history.

If we were to escape alone, everyone else present would be exposed to the meteors.

Some would die, and among them would be innocent people.

Harriet was trying to save everyone from the disaster.

Through her years of research, she had mastered the portals.

She had come up with the idea of not withstanding the attack but erasing it, and she was now putting it into action.

I, Eleris, the Archduke, stared blankly as Harriet single-handedly erased the massive catastrophe.

"Ugh…"

But Harriet's mana was not infinite.

Even with the assistance of the power cartridges, she had to open hundreds of dimensional gates. She sent the falling meteors somewhere else, but even a genius's calculations eventually had their limits.

-Boom! Rumble!

Meteors that eluded Harriet's calculations fell to the ground one by one, and the power cartridges dangling from the necklace she wore were losing their light one by one.

Just like a dying battery, the power cartridges gradually lost their glow.

The Archduke, who had grasped the situation, placed his hand on Harriet's shoulder.

Magicians could use Siphon Mana to replenish their magical power. Just as Eleris had previously done for the magically exhausted Ellen in Darkland.

The Archduke shared his mana with his daughter, who was exceeding her own limits.

Even that would not be an easy task.

Using her own mana, the mana of the power cartridges, and the Archduke's mana replenished in real-time for casting spells.

But Harriet managed to do it.

With gritted teeth, she stared at the night sky, opening dimensional gates using the replenished mana, and erased the falling meteors.

The scale of the task was so massive that even with the Archduke's mana support, there were bound to be limits.

"Please… give it to that child…”

Eleris struggled to say so, and I immediately helped her to Harriet's side without further thought.

Eleris placed her hand on Harriet's shoulder and did the same as the Archduke. Harriet had no time to be taken aback. Her mind must have been on the verge of exploding with the urgent tasks at hand.

-Woosh!

Harriet, enveloped in blue light, began to erase the meteors.

As the two archmages' magical powers replenished her, Harriet quickly opened and closed dozens of dimensional gates. The meteors pouring out of the cracks now vanished before even touching the ground.

How much time had passed in this hellish ordeal?

-Rumble

As the cracks in the night sky disappeared like a lie, and the streaks of light from the falling meteors all vanished.

"Ha, hah… I did it… I did it…”

"Well done, my daughter."

Harriet, drenched in cold sweat, collapsed on the spot, and the Archduke, likewise

nearing mana exhaustion, embraced her and slumped down.

Almost no meteors directly struck the ground.

Eleris, who had helped but could not fully understand the situation, stared wide-eyed at the exhausted Harriet.

Harriet de Saint Owan, who was once preoccupied with casting fireballs at orcs, had now saved us all from disaster.

I did not save Harriet.

Harriet saved everyone here.

It was Harriet who fulfilled my wish that no one from the Empire, nor my faction, would die.

The colossal moon appeared and vanished, and the meteors rained down only to disappear.

Luna Artorious had returned, but if the one who cast the spell could continue the battle, it wouldn't make sense.

Thus, the battle seemed to be drawing to a close.

—---

From the moment the sky opened up and the meteors began to rain down, the battle had essentially come to a standstill.

When a magic referred to as the divine magic of the gods, which only appears in myths, was cast, not only the Imperial Army but also the Council and the Black Order launched massive defenses.

Everyone felt a sense of despair from the overwhelming and vast magic, tense and on edge.

There was no way anyone could survive the hundreds of meteors sweeping across the earth.

But all of the meteors disappeared due to the intervention of the unidentified magician.

And the mage who had cast the massive meteor summoning with the intent to kill everyone present:

Archlich was left in a state no different from an empty shell, crumpled on the ground after paying the price for casting such a spell.

It was a magic he used, having lived for an immense amount of time and accumulated tremendous knowledge and power, which he hoped would bring about the destruction of everything.

There was no need to mention the strength of Archlich, who had cast a magic that neither ordinary humans nor immortal beings could cast.

However, it was thwarted.

By the hands of a magician who had not yet reached the age of twenty.

"Heh, hehehe… Heheheheheheheh…"

Thus, Archlich could only let out a low and eerie laugh, devoid of all energy.

Sensing the end of the huge calamity, the forces of the demon world and the Imperial Army also released their barriers.

The two groups faced each other with Archlich lying in the middle of the battlefield.

Unable to distinguish friend from foe, they had clashed, but Saviolin Turner knew Archlich was at the heart of this battle.

She was prepared for death, but her startled heart could not calm down entirely.

She had suspected something unusual from the murder at the palace, but everything Turner encountered here was a first in her life.

Archlich.

The vampire pack.

The moon growing bizarrely large.

And the meteors pouring from the shattered night sky.

One after another, incredible events unfolded that even the experienced Turner could only be astounded by. They were incidents that would be a lifetime story for someone if they encountered just one, yet they had happened several times over the course of a single night.

'Too dangerous… This place is far too dangerous.'

If all the forces present here were to die, the Empire would lose more than half of its power.

Each of the Imperial knights and mages present held a significant place in the Empire's strength.

Archlich, who had summoned the meteors, was incapacitated, but the identity of the vampire pack remained unknown.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the vampires and the robed group had prioritized attacking Archlich rather than focusing on the Imperial Army.

And so, despite their exceptional skills, no casualties occurred beyond minor injuries. It was because everyone engaged in the battle with caution.

The knights and mages present understood that hurting or killing themselves would ultimately harm the empire, so they acted accordingly.

Saviolin Turner did not know how Archlich's meteor had been thwarted.

However, it was not a measure taken by the empire.

If it was a measure taken by the opponent…

Facing them would mean taking on excessive risks.

They couldn't afford to lose the empire's greatest strength in a battle against unknown entities without being fully prepared.

"That man is a traitor to the empire and a prime criminal suspect we must apprehend. I will not pursue you if you withdraw quietly. Step back."

But orders were orders.

Saviolin Turner had received the command to capture Roswin.

So, they had to take Roswin into custody.

"I won't ask who you are or what you do."

While it was highly likely that they were the demon king's kin, Saviolin Turner made the maximum concession. They couldn't understand why the demon king's kin would be chasing Archlich either.

No, it was Roswin who came to this place, and they were already here.

Why?

Saviolin Turner's questions only seemed to multiply instead of being resolved.

An elderly vampire in a suit, leaning on a cane, stood at the forefront.

Even amid the fierce and violent battle, the old vampire maintained a clean appearance, with not a speck of dirt on his bowler hat or collar.

The old vampire gazed at the fallen Archlich.

"Lukren."

As if uninterested in Saviolin Turner, the old man focused solely on Archlich.

"Have you come all this way to boast that you can wield mythical magic?"

The old man shook his head.

"It's certainly impressive magic, but it was blocked, and even if it hadn't been, what reason do you have for doing something that would only lead to your demise along with ours?"

Antirianus seemed genuinely puzzled by the situation.

"Antirianus…”

The fallen Archlich spoke with a cracked voice.

"Do you desire Akasha…?"

At those words, Antirianus smiled faintly.

Chapter 426

"Oh, Lukren, have you finally decided to tell me what Akasha is?"

"Heh… Hehehe… Yes, Antirianus. You know nothing… absolutely nothing…"

The Archlich, who had lost the ability to continue fighting, let out a low chuckle as he lay defeated.

"I will give you Akasha, Antirianus."

"…"

"Help me."

At Archlich's words, the smile on Antirianus's face grew even more intense.

"Antirianus."

"You don't have any ulterior motives, do you?"

Saviolin Turner listened to the conversation between them.

It was clear that they were exchanging words only they knew about.

There was no need to intervene just yet. Just listening to this conversation was informative enough.

She gestured for her allies, who were about to take action, to stand by as she observed the scene.

There was so much she didn't know.

But Akasha.

That word was etched powerfully in Turner's mind.

And there was unrest among the vampires.

The one called Antirianus didn't seem to gain the trust of his allies. The old man's smile grew darker, and the vampire slowly approached Archlich.

"Lukren, how many times must I ask?"

Crouching in front of Archlich, Antirianus whispered into his ear.

"I asked what Akasha does. I never asked for it."

"…"

"Wasn't it the same before? I never asked for Akasha. I only asked what it does. No one answered, so I eventually became curious."

"…"

"Curiosity can drive people mad."

Archlich was silent for a long time.

"Akasha… can make you a god."

"A god?"

"Yes, a god. With Akasha, you can become a god. Antirianus, both you and I can become gods."

At Archlich's words, Antirianus stood up.

"Hu, hahaha… haha. A god. A god… Heheheheheh…"

The old man began to laugh, covering his mouth as if in a fit of madness. Everyone stared at the bizarre conversation in silence.

"Heheheheheh…"

"Heh…"

"Hu…”

"…”

Abruptly.

The old man's laughter stopped, and his expression turned cold.

"I didn't expect it to be such a trivial thing."

If that was the true nature of Akasha, it seemed of no interest to the old man, and his face was filled with disappointment.

However, a small smile soon appeared on the disappointed old man's face.

"But even trivial things can become interesting depending on how they're used."

“Antirianus!”

“Hey! What are you trying to do?”

"Lukren, I'll take Akasha."

Spatial teleportation was impossible due to the vast barrier. It was also impossible to easily shake off the trackers in this place.

Yet, there were still many ways to get rid of them.

"Do you think you can escape, vampire?"

Saviolin Turner's words brought a smile to Antirianus' face.

"I might have thought of a method like that."

As the old man spread his hand, a large piece of parchment suddenly began to emit light.

"It seems to be worth the time I spent making it."

As the scroll glowed, a dense fog started to envelop the world.

It wasn't a simple magic to invoke, but if the scroll was prepared in advance, it could be used instantly.

"This magic is…!"

Quantum Maze.

Antirianus had prepared this large-scale barrier magic as a magic scroll.

As if anticipating a situation like this would arise someday.

There might be those who could break the Quantum Maze, but buying enough time to escape was entirely possible.

And that much time was more than enough to flee.

—---

Harriet was exhausted, and so was the Archduke. Consequently, both of them fell into a serious state of magical depletion.

Eleris replenished their magic using Syphon Mana, just as she had done for Ellen before. The two of them fell into a sleep-like state.

After the syphon mana dissipated, I could clearly see the thick fog that had disappeared reappearing on the ground.

The spell had been cast suddenly, so its scale was small. Though it was a vast fog that covered a wide area, we were out of its influence.

From the beginning, the battle had been taking place at such a great distance that even with enhanced vision, we couldn't properly see what was happening.

However, as if Eleris had seen what happened on the scene, her eyes widened.

"Antirianus has betrayed us."

“…Betrayal?"

"Yes, it seems… he has joined hands with Cantus Magna."

I hadn't believed that Antirianus would remain a loyal ally forever.

Knowing he was an untrustworthy ally, we had to use him while we could, and Antirianus had been genuinely cooperative.

I had expected him to act unexpectedly at a crucial moment.

But I didn't expect it to be now.

From afar, in the middle of the fog, Eleris and I could see a swarm of black bats carrying something and moving.

The bats, transformed from Antirianus, were taking the Archlich somewhere. As the distance was too great to intercept, Eleris and I had no choice but to watch the spectacle helplessly.

Antirianus had joined hands with Cantus Magna.

"Wherever those scoundrels go, we know where they will end up."

“…That's true."

Cantus Magna's wizards came here searching for the origin of the grimoires.

But this place was a manipulated origin, and the real source of the grimoires was elsewhere.

Now that Antirianus had joined forces with the Archlich, it was clear where the two of them would end up.

They would try to complete Akasha by finding the real source of the grimoires.

"Let's head to the underground of the Demon King's Castle. Before they get there, we either have to secure the grimoires or burn them."

"That's what we must do."

The Demon King's Castle basement held a clear value for those who sought it. After all, it was believed to be the source of the magical tomes, and its conquest would not only lead to the completion of the Akasha, but might also unleash an irreversible

catastrophe.

If I couldn't stop Antirianus and the Archlich, I would be responsible for all the problems caused by the completion of the Akasha.

I could no longer act according to the situation and context.

I looked at the fallen Harriet.

"Rein… Hardt…"

Harriet faintly opened her eyes, gazing at me while lying down.

Had she only been unconscious for a moment, now regaining her consciousness? No, it felt as if she was still only half-conscious.

Harriet's expression seemed as if she was dreaming.

I hesitated, then sat down in front of the fallen Harriet, and carefully embraced her.

Antirianus's betrayal. How would things unfold from here?

Should I not have relied on him?

I don't know.

I know nothing.

Being judged by one's intentions is an ugly thing.

"Blockhead."

"…Yes."

"No matter what happens from now on… just remember one thing…"

Struggling, Harriet wrapped her arms around my neck.

"I wanted… to save everyone…"

One must be judged by the results.

To seek judgment for one's intentions, heart, or will is simply defeatism.

It's nothing more than an excuse for when I fail to accomplish my goals.

Still.

At least.

I wanted to do well.

I wanted to save everyone.

I hoped that someone, at least one person, would recognize that.

"Yes…"

Harriet, seemingly half-asleep, gently stroked my head.

"Trust…"

At those words, a burning sensation welled up inside my chest.

With those last words, Harriet closed her eyes, seemingly falling asleep.

It weighed on my heart to leave her like this, but there was no more time to waste.

The Mage Corps of the Saint Owan Empire would arrive soon, and both the Archduke and Harriet should be safe.

Eleris seemed to have recovered somewhat.

"Let's go, Eleris."

"Yes, Your Highness."

It was uncertain when those trapped in the Quantum Maze would escape.

Though I didn't know if Eleris and I could stop Antirianus and the Archlich alone, we

were the only ones able to act at this moment.

—---

Eleris was exhausted, having received a single strike from Luna Artorius, and having shared her magical power with Harriet, who had used magic of an immense scale.

Eleris and I left the area where the spatial interference field was deployed.

We might have been better off waiting for Lucinil's escape from the Quantum Maze or receiving help from the Black Order, but as we couldn't be sure whether Antirianus and Archlich would head directly to the basement of the Demon King's Castle, we had to act immediately.

-Parat!

"Haa… haa…”

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, Your Highness… Just a little tired…”

I supported the exhausted Eleris, who was struggling even with the use of Mass Teleport, as we walked.

What was fortunate was that the Demon King's Castle garrison had completely withdrawn.

And so, upon arriving at the deserted Demon King's castle, we encountered no needless conflict with the Imperial Army.

As we entered the cold and desolate interior of the Demon King's castle, I continued walking while supporting Eleris.

An ancient Archdemon.

What could that have meant?

And why did Ellen's mother know about it?

"I apologize for hiding it, Your Highness…"

Even without saying anything, Eleris was the first to speak.

"I don't know the details… but now I think I understand. Why, despite disliking battles, I was the only one among the Council's houses who decided to help Darkland."

"…"

The members of the Vampire Council must have known that Eleris was originally an Archdemon. They did not seem to doubt Eleris' decision to help Darkland.

As Eleris leaned on me and walked, she spoke with a weak voice.

"I am an ancient Demon King, now forgotten, who once held a place in the long history of Darkland."

An ancient Archdemon.

Eleris was an unimaginably ancient being. That's why she would be an ancestor of the old Valier family.

"It's not a valuable or interesting story. However…"

Eleris spoke in a sorrowful voice.

"I wished for the extinction of humanity."

"Luna Artorious… she said that wars are born from fear."

"I was afraid of humans. I feared and worried that someday their combined strength would be focused on Darkland. While human nations were fighting amongst themselves, as the Demon King, I could gather the power of Darkland. Extinguishing the divided humans before they formed an empire like now… I considered it my duty as the Demon King."

"So… I turned Darkland into hell."

It seemed like she blamed herself.

What had Eleris done during her time as the Demon King?

"In order to create powerful magical beasts, I conducted crossbreeding, and I dabbled in numerous dark arts and necromancy to create mighty homunculi and chimeras. I mobilized the demons to create weapons of war."

"Countless demons were subjected to brutal training due to my judgment, and I turned a blind eye to the numerous lower demons who died from labor and starvation while stockpiling war materials."

"I was the worst Demon King, who sacrificed the most demons while wishing for humanity's extinction and wanting to create a world for demons."

"The rule of the Archdemon, the existence of the Demon King, is horrifying for it unites the demons."

"I didn't see any demons expressing even the slightest dissatisfaction throughout the entire process."

"They all loved me, followed me, and never questioned my will."

"The existence of a Demon King in Darkland is absolute. If a human king did such things, rebellion would soon arise, but no demon could even muster the will to resist the injustice and tyranny originating from me."

"They followed my words out of love for me, and as they died, they cursed themselves for not being able to grow stronger according to my will, and blamed themselves for not being born strong."

"I did not think it was strange."

"I believed it was a necessary sacrifice for the eternal peace of the demon race."

Countless demons were sacrificed for the sake of the greater good of eternal peace.

There was a time, not long after I had met Eleris, when I had said such words.

Perhaps it was when we were on the magic train.

What if we hadn't obsessed over powerful weapons and magic, but instead focused

on creating something like this?

I had said such words.

Was that statement not blaming the past Demon King Valier, but rather, blaming her?

Eleris prepared for war.

No demon resisted the Archdemon.

Under the blind loyalty to the Archdemon, they believed the Archdemon's commands to be the truth.

The Archdemon is the very existence of a god to the demons. An unquestionable being, receiving love from all.

"So, you waged war?"

“…No. A rebellion took place."

“…How does a rebellion happen?"

Was there an awakened demon due to the Archdemon's extreme tyranny? Did demons from the outskirts who could escape the Archdemon's control attack? Or did the Vampire Council invade? No, that wouldn't be a rebellion, would it?

At my words, Eleris looks at me with a strained smile.

"There is a demon that an Archdemon can’t control."

"Ah… no way."

"An Archdemon cannot control another Archdemon."

Eleris lowers her gaze.

"I was subdued by my own son, who could not withstand my cruelty, who broke my horn."

A son's rebellion against his mother's tyranny.

The only demon capable of opposing the Archdemon.

It must have been an act only possible for those of the same bloodline.

Chapter 427

If I were to fail to fulfill my destiny, the despair and betrayal I felt on the day when my son, who was to inherit the task of completing humanity's extinction, struck me down and broke my horn was indescribable.

Still, perhaps he could not bear to kill his mother, for after breaking my horn, he banished me from the Darklands.

The hornless demon king lost all her power. I could no longer control the demon race, and they no longer followed me.

Only later did I realize that my son had banished me from the Darklands as a final act of mercy towards me. Had I remained, the demons who had escaped my rule would have tried to kill me.

I was left powerless, unable to use my magic, knowledge, or strength.

The pain of having one's horn broken was worse than death for a demon. For a time, I suffered immense pain from the place where my horn once was.

Did I come to my senses and realize my mistake?

No, I was simply furious and indignant.

I was heartbroken.

To have lost everything I had built over such a long time, to have been so close to achieving my goals, only for everything to be destroyed by my own son – the thought filled me with rage.

I could not die like that.

It was too infuriating.

It was too heartbreaking.

It was too unjust.

I did not want to admit that everything was over.

I knew not how, but I sought revenge. I wished to reclaim my throne with dignity and fulfill my uncompleted destiny against my son, who had brought such humiliation upon me.

I searched for a way for a hornless demon to regain power.

Realizing that I needed to become immortal in order to amass power over a long period, I became a vampire. As a vampire, I would accumulate the power of other beings within me, growing stronger once more.

I traversed both the Darklands and the human realm, taking the blood of many powerful demons, mighty magical beasts, and strong humans, sometimes engaging in life-threatening battles to seek the blood of the strong.

Upon hearing rumors of individuals who had achieved the pinnacle of vampire power in the ancient far north, I sought out the vampire lords, obtaining the power of a Vampire Lord, and thus became one of the Tuesday Clan.

Even after that, I took the blood of countless beings.

I devoured everything in my path, again and again.

So many consumed beings formed a mountain of corpses, and the blood I absorbed flowed like a river. I had devoured something for a very long time.

At some point, I had no choice but to become the head of the Tuesday Clan.

The previous head, who had grown weary of living and had given up on the world, said this as he passed on his position to me:

"Is it not time to put an end to the slaughter for the sake of slaughter?"

"Even if you drink the blood of every creature in the world, your thirst will never be quenched."

"Consider whether you truly desire what you seek." And with that, he closed their

eyes.

It was a thought I had never considered before.

For a very long time, I realized I hadn't thought at all.

At some point, I had become an entity driven solely by instinct, killing to kill, drinking to drink, and growing stronger for the sake of strength.

I aimlessly wandered the world in search of powerful blood, but my original desire for revenge and purpose had vanished, buried deep within the passage of time.

I was still not enough.

Not enough to face the Demon King.

Not enough to reclaim the throne.

While I continued to slaughter for the sake of growing stronger, the throne of the Darklands had already changed hands.

The son who had broken my horn and banished me had long since met his end, and I only recently discovered that his daughter had become the next Demon King.

I had become a purposeless vampire, an immortal wanderer, roaming the continents in search of blood.

Why must the throne of the demonic realm be mine again?

Why must humanity be annihilated?

Why had I ever desired such things?

It had all become unknowable.

Lost in my obsession with strength and the pursuit of blood, I had become a mad vampire, consumed by an insatiable thirst.

I had realized far too late that my vague desire for revenge and the throne had already disappeared.

The power born from mountains of corpses and rivers of blood resided within me, but I had discovered far too late that I wanted nothing to do with it.

Even if countless tyrants sacrificed their people with their misguided actions, ultimately, it wasn't my hand that killed them.

As a tyrant, I sacrificed numerous demons, and after becoming a vampire, I piled up mountains of corpses with my own hands once more.

There was likely no one in this world who had caused more slaughter than I had.

It wasn't atonement, but having lost the meaning behind it all, I no longer engaged in slaughter.

Roaming the world in search of blood, I had become lost in emptiness, drifting aimlessly once more.

Without a purpose or a destination, I moved about like a wind that had lost its bearings, touching wherever I landed.

Sometimes in the Darklands, sometimes in the lands of humans.

Despite having lived for such an immense length of time, it was only then that I truly saw how beings lived.

When I was the Demon King, demons were tools and humans were enemies.

As a vampire, all beings were merely ingredients for strength.

Only after losing all my desires was I able to observe the living world without any purpose.

The way humans lived.

The way demons lived.

I watched them without purpose or reason, simply because they were there before my eyes.

Despite having traversed countless lands and consumed the blood of innumerable

beings, it was as if I was seeing the countless sights I had witnessed for the first time.

One day, I crossed mountains; another, I walked through snowy plains; and on other days, I passed through deserts, straits, and jungles, observing the myriad ways in which countless beings lived and the various forms they took.

As everyone lived their lives, each seemingly similar yet distinct, I took in the landscapes of those lives.

I knew just how great a sin I had committed and how many lives I had destroyed.

I had shattered and ruined countless lives and foundations by gathering things that could have been more beautiful, or were already enough, in the insatiable bag of desire.

I am a sinner who learned the way to love something far too late.

A hideous and cowardly vampire who only realized the worthiness of love for those things after losing all rights to love and cherish them.

So, I thought to myself.

The mountain of sins I have built up is too great; the day when it can be covered by good deeds will never come. At the very least…

At the very least…

Let's not accumulate any more sins.

My life remained uncertain, as it always had.

I no longer drank blood, but I still aimlessly wandered the world, watching over something, trying to help someone as best as I could. However, I was cautious not to overstep my bounds.

I had no right to accumulate good deeds.

Showing a very small, almost imperceptible, amount of sympathy to someone was the best I could do.

That was how I spent my time, in indifference and acquiescence.

As I lived through the long, endless days of my uncertain existence, I eventually heard such a story.

The war between the Darkland and humanity was drawing near.

For the first time in a while, I felt confusion.

In that war, where countless people were bound to die, I didn't think that I, a forgotten Demon King and ancient vampire, would have a role to play.

However,

I did feel a sense of duty.

As the Demon King who once brought illness to the Darkland with tyranny.

As the Demon King who wished for the end of humanity, who hated humans.

As an Archdemon, a very ancient origin.

I felt a sense of duty that I should at least watch over the war, even if I couldn't play a significant role.

It couldn't be said that there was no sense of kinship left for the diluted and vanished blood of the Archdemon.

I believed that even if I couldn't provide the greatest help, offering a small amount of support, like barely holding the hand of a distant descendant, was what I had to do.

So, I sought out Valier and joined his ranks.

I wished for the war to conclude without shedding much blood. Regardless of whose victory it might be, I believed that the only good in war was in it ending swiftly, as it only resulted in bloodshed.

As I expected, I took on a rather unremarkable role and watched the progress of the war from a distance, far from the battlefield.

And then… as the war was drawing to a close.

On a certain day when the war had already ended far away from me.

A young boy opened the door to my shop and entered.

When that boy realized who I was.

I was…

I had a feeling that I was destined for something.

Having finished her long story, Eleris looks at me.

In a place where the Demon King would never appear, Eleris met me.

What could have crossed her mind at that moment?

Although she had never intended to take on any role, when the fallen Demon King of Darkland, her distant descendant and the last of her lineage, came into her embrace.

Eleris must have felt an intense destiny that she could not remain a bystander on the outskirts of the incident.

"As for the story after that… you know it already."

Eleris is a long-forgotten ancient Demon King.

Even the previous Valier knew that Eleris was a Lord Vampire but didn't know she was an ancient Demon King.

Now, I finally understand all of Eleris's actions.

The behavior and gazes that came out with a motherly attitude every time she dealt with me, could it have originated from such feelings?

The previous Valier would have already taken the position of an absolute ruler as the Demon King.

But since I was clumsy, lost my memory, and didn't even have proper abilities, Eleris must have been worried about me no matter what I did, and she couldn't help but worry if I would get hurt or die.

Eleris, who had been a tyrant, couldn't have been a proper parent.

So, when she dealt with me, she might have tried to give me some sort of affection that she couldn't give to her child at that time.

There had been times when I wondered if Eleris was similar to my mother, but it turns out she was a similar existence.

An Archdemon turned into a vampire.

That was Eleris's true form.

Though she lost all the power of an Archdemon, she was still an Archdemon at her core.

That's why she stood by the Demon King's side to watch the end, or victory, of the demon world established by the Archdemon.

"There's something I've been curious about for a long time."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Now that I knew Eleris was my ancestor, I wondered if I should address her differently. But since she still called me "Your Highness," it didn't seem necessary to sort out the titles.

"Did you have a husband then?"

"Yes."

I had been curious about this for a long time, and now I finally got to ask.

"More importantly, how do Archdemons, being such a small number, maintain their species?"

Currently, I am the only Archdemon. If you were to include Eleris and Charlotte

broadly, but strictly speaking, I am the only pure-blooded Archdemon.

Had Eleris married another Archdemon?

Had the number dwindled down to this point?

Eleris looked at me quietly as if asking if that was my question.

"Archdemons can procreate with any species and that… um…"

"I get what you're saying. You don't need to explain further."

"Yes… of course, I don't have accurate information about what exactly is possible… but generally… and it's also very difficult for Archdemons to have offspring…"

Seeing Eleris fumbling for words, I thought I understood what she meant.

Archdemons can, well…

Do it with just about anything.

Uh…

Is that how it is?

I can't understand why…

It's unclear where it begins and where it ends.

It's terrifying.

Terrifying, really!

It might be better not to know who Eleris's husband really was!

So, that's why Eleris and the others haven't said much about who I like or anything like that until now…

"As generations pass, the blood of the Archdemon gradually weakens."

Now I understand why my demon control ability is so weak.

We walk down into the underground of the Demon Lord's castle.

"When I heard that Your Highness wanted to prevent a great tragedy in the future… I dared to think, perhaps atonement is possible."

I told Eleris all my secrets.

About the Gate Incident that will occur in the future, that it will be a great tragedy for all beings, and that I want to stop it.

That's why I got involved in the search for Akasha.

"Of course, I know that no matter what, the mountain of sins I have accumulated cannot be cleared away… But if it's possible, if I can contribute even a little to prevent that future tragedy. Maybe I can alleviate, even just a tiny bit, the weight of the slaughter and sins I've accumulated… I dared to think that way…"

Eleris seeks atonement, but she knows that to desire it for herself is both extravagant and repulsive.

Yet still, she thinks that if helping me can alleviate her sins even a little, she will cooperate for her own sake.

She would be afraid to take anyone's side in a war, but this is about saving everyone.

So Eleris hopes my words are sincere, and she helps me.

"Your Highness…"

"Yes?"

"I believe it is fortunate that I have met you, no matter how this turns out. That you wandered the human-filled Imperial Capital and found me, it is my luck, and your luck… That's what I believe."

That our meeting is lucky for both of us.

Hoping and believing that, Eleris speaks, and I continue to support her as we

descend the stairs.

"It might not have been luck that brought us together."

"…"

I put more strength into the arm supporting Eleris.

Our encounter in the shop in the Imperial Capital was the beginning of this entire story.

If I hadn't met Eleris, I might have wandered some street in the Imperial Capital and lived like a beggar or been caught and hanged for being a demon.

If I hadn't met Eleris, I wouldn't have been able to enter the temple, and none of this would have even begun.

Can our meeting be considered lucky for both of us?

Will it be remembered as such?

I don't know.

Nevertheless,

"Even if it wasn't luck, I'm confident I won't regret it."

I won't regret any of this.

"…"

Upon hearing my words, tears welled up in Eleris's eyes.

Soon, we were able to arrive at the underground bunker of the Demon King's Castle.

It was certain that we had arrived before Antirianus and the Archlich.

Eleris had regained some strength, having somewhat recovered by now.

"If the way to break through the Quantum Maze and reach here is the same, do you think they can also break through the maze and come here?"

"I'm not quite sure about that."

I didn't know for sure whether only Archdemons could reach this place.

The important thing was that after me and Charlotte, Eleris could also enter this place. Since Charlotte, who had only half a soul, could come here, it was certain that the Archdemon who had become a vampire could enter this place as well.

Eleris and I headed toward the library.

Roswin had coveted the grimoires Charlotte had taken from this place, committed a murder in the palace, and headed for the Lich's tomb.

So, once Antirianus betrayed us, he was bound to find a way to reach this place soon.

Before that, we needed to retrieve or burn the grimoires.

"Still, it feels… such a waste to burn them…"

"I'm a magician too, so it's regrettable that I can't retrieve them… but we don't know what will happen when Akasha is completed…"

Eleris and I sighed in front of the library.

"Maybe it's right to burn them if there's something like the magic Archlich used."

"I suppose that's one way to think about it…"

I knew that magic was powerful, but just imagining what would have happened if that meteor had crashed into the ground made me feel dizzy.

Of course, it was even more absurd that Harriet had managed to stop it.

Magic in itself was dangerous, and it was better not to have such high-level magic in the world.

It might be better to burn the grimoires than secure them, considering that such

grimoires might be lying dormant somewhere in this library.

As I gazed at the library for a moment, the title of a certain book caught my eye.

[Understanding the Orbital Structure of Meteor Clusters through Celestial Observation and Dimensional Gate Opening through Orbital Calculations]

It was an incredibly thick book with a rather long title.

What was this?

I wasn't sure, but was it my imagination that this felt somewhat similar in context to that magic?

I pulled out the thick book.

"Your Highness, here…"

Eleris seemed to have discovered something as well, holding up a book from somewhere.

The book Eleris held had the same title.

[Understanding the Orbital Structure of Meteor Clusters through Celestial Observation and Dimensional Gate Opening through Orbital Calculations]

Eleris stared blankly at the grimoire I was holding.

"It seems to be the same book…"

"…Indeed."

We had pulled out exactly the same book from completely different bookshelves.

A strange shiver ran down our spines.

Charlotte had taken a considerable number of grimoires from here not long ago, and I had seen the pile of books scattered throughout Roswin's house.

I had clearly seen that their scale was far from ordinary.

So, there should be at least one or two empty shelves here.

"Why… are all the bookshelves…?"

However.

Every bookshelf that came into my view was completely filled without the slightest gap.

Past experiences flashed through my mind.

The same book in the hands of Eleris and me. It was probably a magic book related to meteor summoning.

When I first discovered this bunker with Charlotte and Turner, I tried to find a magic book in this library that could improve Charlotte's condition. For example, something dealing with souls.

I found a book on soul manipulation right away.

The second time I visited with Eleris and Lucinil, I tried to find another version of soul manipulation to show Lucinil.

I found the demon-language version of soul manipulation straight away.

And Eleris found the magic book that designed this labyrinth, called Quantum Maze, right away.

And now.

I tried to find a magic book similar to meteor summoning and found it immediately.

This library.

Strangely enough, there are many magics.

Oddly enough.

Could it be?

Have I been mistaken all this time?

Eleris and I stared at each other blankly.

I turned my gaze to one of the library's bookshelves.

Could there be a magic book about fireballs?

As I shifted my gaze, a book caught my eye.

[Understanding and Application of Basic Destructive Magic of the Fire Element – Fireball]

Although relatively thin compared to other magic books, there was a book on fireballs.

"These books on the shelves are changing in real-time."

"Yes… definitely…"

Whenever I tried to find a magic book, that book would be on the shelf at some point.

That's why I could find them right away without wasting time.

Eleris and I both turned pale.

I never wanted it before.

Because it would be in the hands of others.

I didn't get curious because I thought so. I didn't think there would be information about it here.

But now.

I want to know.

No, this bookshelf will tell me.

What is Akasha? Is there a magic book or something with information about Akasha?

I looked around once again.

But there was no book in sight.

Is there no material about what Akasha is?

No, is the keyword wrong?

Is it possible that there are not only magic books but also other books?

Anything else would be fine.

A record or document about Akasha, even if it's not a book about magic. Is there something?

Anything?

As I looked around again, there was a book in sight.

A notebook-like object bound in red leather caught my eye.

I took out the book, but there was no title.

I opened the book.

After seeing the first page, I couldn't help but hold my breath.

[My son. Never use Akasha for destruction.]

That single sentence.

It wasn't numerous complex theories and explanations, but that one sentence that explained everything to me.

"Eleris…"

"Yes… Your Highness."

Unknowingly, I had been searching for Akasha, even though it was already in the palm of my hand.

Akasha is an artifact.

And naturally, I had thought that an artifact would be an object.

But it's not an object.

"I think… this bookshelf, no… not just the bookshelf…"

I look around the library.

"This space… itself… seems to be… Akasha…"

Akasha was, indeed, a space.

Chapter 428

All the efforts to find Akasha had been in vain, for it had already been in my grasp.

It was only then that I could finally understand everything.

Why there had been only one mage in Cantus Magna.

What kind of deeds the surviving Valier from the original work had done.

[My son.]

[In every magic in the world, there is a certain degree of principle embedded. The Fireball spell contains the principle of generating fire, the Lightning Bolt spell contains the principle of discharging current, and the Homunculus research contains the principle of creating life. How about magic that deals with cold and heat, magic that summons water, and magic that makes plants grow?]

[In all magic of the world, there is a certain degree of methodology for implementing the principles of the world using mana as a material.]

[If one could succeed in gathering enough of the world's principles to no longer require anything else, if there were a magical tool that could do this.]

[Through it, one could create a single world.]

[A tool of creation designed to concentrate principles and logic from the world's magic to compose the world.]

[Akasha is such a thing.]

[I cannot know the origin of Akasha. Perhaps the mages of Cantus Magna had picked up and used the shell that the five gods had created for the creation and left somewhere, or it might have been an artifact that the founder of Cantus Magna had hoped to complete and then left for future generations to continue to complete.]

[Of course, if they had not foolishly tried to kill me and covet my magic, I would

never have known about Akasha.]

[The process of stealing Akasha while deceiving their eyes was complicated, but in the end, I succeeded, and now I can dream of a different paradise than before.]

[A paradise achieved through creation, not the peace obtained through the extinction of humanity.]

[However, I cannot be certain of anything as I cannot know how this war will end.]

[My son, if you are reading this, it means I no longer exist in this world.]

[I, your father, who knows your temperament best, have prepared something for you, but I cannot know whether it will function properly.]

[My son, only the Four Heavenly Kings, you, and I know about the whereabouts of Akasha and our true purpose. Do not speak carelessly about Akasha. Cantus Magna has self-destructed after the disappearance of Akasha, but remnants may still be searching for it.]

[Also, if humans learn of the existence of Akasha, it is only natural that they would covet it. Even if we tell them what we intended to do through Akasha, they will not believe us. This war, which is fought because both sides want peace, is the very proof that trust between the two cannot be formed.]

[If I die and Darkland is destroyed, walk the path of completing Akasha rather than seeking revenge through it. Humans have always been our greatest, most dangerous, and most powerful enemies. The path of annihilating them will be more difficult than leading the surviving brethren to paradise through creation.]

[The completion of Akasha was within reach.]

[We have always fought for survival. Now that there are other alternatives, we have no reason to desire war and destruction.]

[I am uneasy entrusting Akasha to your hands, but if I were to die, you would be the only Archdemon. You alone can lead our lost kin.]

[Remember this: if you activate the incomplete Akasha recklessly, doom will come.]

[Never be swayed by petty revenge.]

[My son, I implore you.]

[Complete Akasha.]

I gently closed the final note of the late Valier.

Eleris, having read the contents, looked as if she doubted her own eyes.

"The Demon King… didn't want war…"

The vanished memory of Valier.

Within it already lay the answers and clues to everything.

That's why I've come this long, winding road to finally reach Akasha.

Akasha itself is a tool that records the principles of the world, and when all principles are recorded, it can create a new world.

There was no portal to another world.

The other world is created.

Through the instrument of creation called Akasha.

It's clear what Valier, who survived the Demon War and fled to this bunker, did.

The foolish and incompetent Valier Junior could never have completed Akasha.

Revenge and anger would not have granted him the power and wisdom.

Valier Junior, embracing revenge, would have struggled in this underground to find a way to complete Akasha, only to eventually realize it was impossible for him.

And then,

Exhausted by his vague revenge and his own incompetence, he activated the incomplete Akasha in despair.

The imperfectly created world, the monsters born from its unfinished laws, started to enter reality.

That must be the Gate Incident.

[Event Completion - Murder Case Tracking]

[Acquired 5,000 Achievement Points.]

[Additional Reward - Acquired 10,000 Achievement Points.]

[Challenge Completion - Identifying Akasha's Identity]

[Acquired 50,000 Achievement Points.]

Now I understood why the challenge's name was 'Identifying Akasha's Identity' rather than 'Finding Akasha'.

Akasha had already been found, and it was necessary to discover what Akasha was.

[Challenge Completion - Finding Cantus Magna]

[Acquired 30,000 Achievement Points.]

Cantus Magna had already perished. Unaware that Demon King Valier had taken Akasha, they fell apart while searching for the vanished Akasha.

Roswin, who had infiltrated the Royal Magic Department, was the remnant of the disappeared Cantus Magna.

There could be only one reason he suddenly committed murder and went to the Tomb of Lich.

Among the spellbooks Charlotte brought to the Royal Magic Department, there must have been a spell that only existed in Akasha.

He must have been beside himself.

The magic that could only be found in the vanished Akasha was discovered.

Thus, he killed the mages and tortured them to find the source, but in the end, he could not determine it, so he headed to the most likely place - the tomb of the Lich.

His goal was not to secure the grimoire and insert it into Akasha.

He came to retrieve the lost Akasha.

His achievement score exceeded 100,000 in an instant, and he reached the final destination of everything.

The answer to everything, in the end, was too simple.

"By doing nothing… it could have been resolved…"

Cantus Magna had long disappeared, and at some point, Darkland became the master of Akasha.

The trigger for the Gate incident was Valier.

So, if I do nothing, the Gate incident won't happen.

Eleris cautiously embraced me.

"Your Highness… at least, we have discovered the truth like this…"

"Yes, I suppose."

Before the incident erupts, we just need to stop everything from now on.

Doing nothing is enough.

We are not too late to realize this. We should be grateful for that alone.

I grabbed Eleris's arm.

Yes.

We have reached the final destination and conclusion of everything.

To prevent anything from happening, we just need to live as we are now. Without any

conspiracy or plan, just living in the temple.

Once we deal with issues concerning the followers of the Demon King and the Demon forces, there will be no more impending threats.

We must carefully consider how to handle Akasha.

In the past, Valier wanted to create a world with Akasha where humans and demons would not oppose each other. He wanted the eternal end of battle.

However, just as humans did, Valier did not trust humans.

The humans would not have believed Valier's statement about leaving for a new world using Akasha. Instead, they must have thought that the humans who coveted Akasha would snatch it away.

Akasha is a magical tool that can bring destruction to the world if misused.

So, until their death, the Four Heavenly Kings and Valier would not have spoken about Akasha.

They trusted Valier Junior and, perhaps, believed in the advent of the Demon King who would resurrect through Charlotte's body.

And the one who prevented the advent of the Demon King was me, his son.

Only the Four Heavenly Kings and Valier knew the truth.

"Now I understand why the human, Larken Simonstite… sided with Darkland…"

The first human Heavenly King, Grandmaster, and the master of Saviolin Tana, Larken Simonstite.

In some circumstances, Valier either captured Larken Statement or he sought Valier.

The eternal end of the battle is through perfect separation between the two.

He agreed with Valier's thoughts and sided with Darkland.

Because that would be an even better outcome.

However, the Great Demon War occurred, and the heroes killed the Four Heavenly Kings and the Demon King.

The hero party might have heard the truth about Akasha from the Four Heavenly Kings, or they might not.

In the end, the battle took place, and the hero party died along with the Four Heavenly Kings of the demon world and the Demon King.

The hero party might have fought to reclaim the Akasha after hearing about it, but the details are unknown.

That's why it's possible that the Four Heavenly Kings did not join forces but instead faced the hero party one by one in an attempt to persuade them.

However, the truth is now unknowable. The truth of the battle is beyond my comprehension since it took place outside my awareness.

What has happened has already happened.

The Akasha is in my grasp.

But this place is not only known to me.

Charlotte and Turner already know of this location, and Charlotte has even decided to supply the royal family with the magic books found here.

She may not have realized it yet, but Charlotte will undoubtedly discover that this place is incredibly strange.

What will happen if the Imperial Royal Family learns about the Akasha?

It is unknown.

But it cannot be left like this.

There is no reason to delay any longer now that everything has become clear.

This is an extremely dangerous artifact, possessing infinite utility, and it might be the object capable of putting an end to all discord between demons and humans.

I might have to complete the secret wish that Valier couldn't achieve, which was given up by Valier Junior in the original work.

If Charlotte unknowingly meddles with the Akasha, it's not inconceivable that she could cause a gate incident.

"There must be a way to move the Akasha to another location, but for now, I have to find out later…"

It was certain that chaos would ensue since I disappeared from the Lich's tomb.

"First, I must return to the Imperial Capital."

The longer it takes me to return, the more uncontrollable the situation will become.

"The tool of creation…"

On the outskirts of the battlefield.

Antirianus quietly listened to the story while facing The Archlich.

"Yeah, it seemed like you guys had the Akasha without even knowing what it was."

The Archlich Lukren had come to the Lich's tomb because it contained magic that had been independently developed within the Cantus Magna.

Upon discovering traces of the Akasha, Lukren thought this was his last chance to retrieve it.

Why couldn't the Cantus Magna be found until now?

Why had Lukren come to the Lich's tomb alone?

Antirianus finally understood the whole situation.

The Cantus Magna had been robbed of the Akasha, and they were unable to determine who had taken it, which led to mutual suspicion and ultimately their destruction.

Moreover, it wasn't someone from within but the former Demon King Valier who had stolen the Akasha.

And the current Demon King had been unaware all this time that what he held was the Akasha.

"If you cooperate in retrieving the Akasha, I'll forget about what you've done. Tell me, Antirianus, where is the Akasha?"

If he cooperated in finding the lost tool of creation, all past events would be forgotten.

Antirianus tilted his head slightly upon hearing Archlich's words.

Leaving aside whether to believe him or not, there was another issue.

"Lukren, why do you want to become a god?"

"What did you say?"

"Do you think becoming a god would be enjoyable?"

Lukren narrowed his brows, as if he didn't understand Antirianus' words.

"It's about becoming an absolute being, controlling everything according to my will and making everything function as I desire."

"So why would you assume that would be enjoyable?"

Antirianus smiled faintly.

"Joy and pleasure in life and the world come from their unpredictability."

"Do you think that having the omnipotent power to control everything according to your will, a world that moves only according to your will, and the ability to turn everything to dust with a mere gesture would bring you happiness?"

"Well, it might be fun for a short while."

"But soon you'd lose interest."

"At the end of a process of discarding, recreating, discarding, and recreating, what would remain but boredom?"

"What would remain but boredom?"

"If the dreams that Cantus Magna has nurtured thus far have been delusions of the pleasures of being a Creator… it's terribly disappointing."

"The world is enjoyable when experienced as a creation. Regardless of the world you create as a god, if you encounter it not as a creation but from the standpoint of a creator, what appreciation could you possibly gain other than admiring the technical solidity of well-crafted objects?"

"Without despair, sadness, pain, anger, hatred, or animosity, there can be no joy, ecstasy, indulgence, pleasure, or love."

"Lukren, the world is chaos, and I love that chaos."

"Being the master of chaos would ultimately be a very boring endeavor."

At Antirianus's words, Lukren was at a loss for a response.

"You madman, you're refusing the path to godhood?"

"If you're going to use the Akasha for such a boring task, I can't allow you to have it."

Antirianus smiled.

"I told you, Lukren, I'm curious about what the Akasha is, but I never said I wanted it for myself."

Antirianus raised his staff.

"At least the boy I know would find a more interesting use for the Akasha than you."

"Antirianus… you insane old man…"

Still suffering from the aftereffects of using large-scale magic, Lukren was no match for Antirianus at the moment.

There was only one reason for rejecting the path to godhood: it would undoubtedly be dull.

Lukren saw madness flash in the golden eyes of the old vampire.

"Lukren, will you show me despair one last time?"

The embodiment of madness beyond good and evil.

"Show me the pain, despair, and wretchedness of having my long-dreamed desire end in such a place."

A mad sorcerer seeking despair and passion.

"Considering how long I've waited, you've shown me a terribly boring dream. Shouldn't you at least scream properly for me?"

Antirianus raised his staff.

Chapter 429

Not long ago.

Daytime.

Lydia Schmitt was retreating.

Charlotte and Ellen were slowly approaching Lydia Schmitt.

"…"

Lydia didn't know the situation. She recognized the princess's face, but not Ellen's.

However, she knew that they were Reinhardt's classmates. The two of them had appeared unexpectedly at the Vampire Council.

Lydia's mind was racing.

She couldn't figure out why these two had come to Epiax or what they were searching for. The only thing she knew was that she was the only one left in Epiax at that moment.

The two girls approached, seemingly sure of something.

"Do you know Reinhardt?"

The quiet, black-haired girl asked.

Upon hearing that, Lydia Schmitt clenched her teeth. The fact that Reinhardt was the Demon King might be revealed.

"It seems like you know."

The girl's desperate voice, filled with a sense of certainty from Lydia's lack of response, rang pitifully in Lydia's ears.

Reinhardt's identity would be exposed.

Eleris's master, the Demon King Reinhardt.

If Lydia asked for help, those two would take her back to the world.

Kidnapped by the forces of the demon world, Lydia had been isolated in this extreme place, unable to even go outside.

Through them, she could return to the world.

But.

What was there?

What could she hope for?

With nothing precious left and a heart wanting to deny even her faith, what could she hope for by returning to the world?

Here, in this place, living a life sensing a small warmth seemed better. Lydia couldn't understand why she had to leave.

But those two.

Those two would reveal what they saw here to the world.

Reinhardt's identity would be exposed, and Eleris would suffer a terrible fate as well.

Lydia didn't serve Reinhardt as her master.

It was just that, in a situation where she should have been killed, Eleris had pleaded for her life.

And as a result.

If Lydia, whom Eleris had spared, became the reason for Reinhardt's identity to be exposed and his death, what kind of guilt would that gentle vampire feel?

In the end, Eleris would realize that her clumsy mercy had killed her master. Lydia

couldn't imagine the pain Eleris would go through.

If her existence threatened Reinhardt, Eleris would blame herself.

That always-smiling face would be distorted with sorrow, despair, and pain.

That's what would happen.

If her existence brought about Reinhardt's death and Eleris's despair.

She had to prevent that from happening.

Lydia didn't know why those two girls had come here or how they had found out about this place.

But.

They must not return.

Uuuuung!

Lydia Schmitt's body was enveloped in a holy light.

She didn't say a word.

No matter what she said, it could be a clue.

"I'm sorry, juniors."

Leaving only those words, Lydia closed her mouth.

Swoosh

Flutter!

As if sensing something, the approaching girl held a silver sword in her right hand and a sunlit cape draped over her shoulder.

"Sacred relics?"

Not just one, but two.

Lydia clenched her teeth.

How could someone possess two sacred relics?

Before she could find an answer to her question, Lydia witnessed an even more unbelievable scene.

Dark energy flowed through the princess's body, standing behind them, and she soon transformed into a grotesque figure shrouded in darkness.

The princess raised her blackened hand to the sky.

Hssssss!

A sharp spear of darkness, as if forged from the shadows, materialized above the princess's fingertips.

The princess pointed her finger at herself.

That's…

Dangerous.

Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwang!

As Lydia leaped away, dozens of shadowy spears struck the ground where she had stood, causing a thunderous explosion.

Two sacred relics, accompanied by a bizarre and ominous power.

"…"

Lydia stared at the two girls.

They couldn't be underestimated.

"Is this my grave?"

The light that enveloped Lydia's body began to take on a crimson hue.

Rumble!

A unique power used by the knights of Als.

Berserk.

Lydia Schmitt risked her life.

For Eleris.

—---

Lydia Schmitt was the winner of last year's Unrestricted Tournament.

Although her victory was due to Olivia Lanze's forfeiture in the final match, Lydia Schmitt's abilities were not to be taken lightly.

She had graduated from the Temple Royal Class without attending the graduation ceremony.

Among the chosen elite, she was the best of the best.

Soon, her skills were considered on par with those of the top active knights.

Her prowess alone surpassed Ellen Artorius, just as Olivia had.

In addition, she wielded the divine power of Als, specialized for combat, and now, she was using the power of Berserk to strengthen herself, burning her own life force in the process.

Jjeong!

"Gah!"

Ellen was knocked back and rolled across the castle floor after being struck by a powerful punch.

Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwang!

Not only did she avoid the shadowy spears summoned by Charlotte with her incredible agility and body control, but she also simultaneously charged forward, aiming her palm strike at Charlotte.

Shing!

Charlotte disappeared into the shadows, reappearing about ten paces back.

Surprised by the sudden appearance, Ellen and Charlotte had wanted to talk, but Lydia Schmitt was intent on killing them without saying a word.

Ellen, who had been knocked down, struggled to get back up.

Lydia Schmitt charged towards her at an almost godlike speed, delivering a powerful spinning kick with all her weight behind it.

"Huff!"

Jjeojeong!

Ellen's defensive move blocked the kick, but she couldn't completely absorb the impact, and she was pushed back several steps.

Despite her kick being repelled by the force of the flames, Lydia regained her stance and retreated a few steps.

All the upperclassmen of the Royal Class were monsters.

Even with the support of two sacred relics and the combined efforts of Charlotte and Ellen, who used an unidentified power, Ellen was still being pushed back.

There were too many things Ellen couldn't understand.

It was certain that Lydia Schmidt was the one that Reinhardt took to Ellena's shop.

And there, at the location presumed to house Ellena's statue, stood Lydia Schmitt.

And Lydia Schmitt immediately attempted to kill them.

There were too many things they couldn't understand.

They couldn't make sense of the situation.

But there was one certainty.

Reinhardt.

He was no hero.

Swoosh!

Ellen, who charged at Lydia, brandished her Lament, and Lydia parried with the edge of her holy sword, thrusting her fist into Ellen's vital spot.

Clang!

However, that fist was deflected by a dark spear summoned from the side, swiping through the air.

Nonetheless, Lydia Schmitt twisted her body while wrapping Ellen's Lament around her armpit with her left hand that had parried the sword.

With Als' divine power and her enhanced magical power.

Lydia's physical ability, even with Berserk, was beyond what Ellen could handle.

Fwip!

With a single rotation, Ellen was pulled into Lydia's embrace along with her Lament.

Crash!

"Urgh… Hah!"

Lydia, with a punch to Ellen's vitals again, leaped towards Ellen, who was sent flying and had lost her sword.

With the intention of stomping her head and crushing it.

Whoosh!

Bang! Clang! Ka-clang!

But a wave of dark spears formed at Lydia's side, repelling her.

“Ah… Ugh… Hngh…”

Ellen, struggling to get up, couldn't even stand properly and dry heaved.

Lydia Schmitt, embedded in the castle wall with the dark spears, got up again, seemingly unharmed, with dust covering her.

“Insane… She's like a monster…”

Charlotte, who had taken the form of darkness, was overwhelmed by Lydia Schmitt to the extent that she had even forgotten her own state.

Two holy artifacts.

And the power of the Demon King.

She couldn't yet wield the power of the Demon King as destructively as when she had gone berserk, and Charlotte's power was weakened during the day, so she couldn't be at her full strength.

But it was still the power of the Demon King.

And it was being suppressed by a single Royal Class elite graduate.

Charlotte was experiencing, in a way she never wanted to, what kind of monsters the Empire was raising in the temple.

The temple, the Empire.

And the greatness of humanity.

Now was not the time to be impressed, as that power was trying to kill her.

“…”

Lydia remained silent.

As if to never let them have any assurance.

If she were to die without killing them, anything she said could become a cause for concern.

The silent holy knight approached them like terror.

Ellen, staggering, rose again.

The offensive Lament.

The defensive Lapelt.

With the assistance of two holy artifacts, she was practically in a similar condition to a swordmaster.

Was Lydia too powerful, or did Ellen lack the ability to fully utilize the power of the holy artifacts?

Ellen Artorius didn't know.

She also didn't know that Lydia Schmitt was fighting with the power of her life on the line.

But one thing was certain.

If she were to die here.

The truth remains elusive.

Why it happened, why it had to be this way, who he really was.

Why.

Why he cared for me so much.

I don't know.

I will die not knowing.

"I don't want to…”

Ellen whispered.

She didn't know why Lydia Schmitt wanted to kill her.

But she would die if things continued this way.

She possessed two sacred relics, yet she was unable to defeat the holy knight before her.

If she died, it would all be over.

"I… I can't die here."

Facing the approaching Lydia Schmitt, Ellen gritted her teeth.

What must be done to defeat the formidable foe known as Lydia Schmitt? Even with the power of Magic Body Strengthening and two potent sacred relics, she was unable to overcome this monster.

Ellen clenched Lament, her gaze fixed on Lydia Schmitt, who was shrouded in a crimson aura.

Lydia Schmitt, empowered by Berserk, was a force not even Olivia Lanze could easily handle.

Had the fight continued as it had, no one could know the outcome.

Lydia Schmitt stepped forward, her foot striking the ground.

It wasn't an attempt to leap.

-Boom!

The impact from her foot alone sent cracks sprawling across the surface of the ground and caused fractures to form on the walls of the fortress.

-Crumble

The fortress walls, riddled with cracks, began to collapse.

-Rumble

In a single step, the floors and walls of the fortress crumbled, the ceiling collapsed, and rocks fell from above.

-Bang! Crash! Boom!

The once-dark fortress was bathed in white light.

-Whoooooosh!

A chilling blizzard rushed in, painting everything in white.

'She must have sensed that my power weakens in the presence of light… '

Charlotte gritted her teeth, hiding in the darkness as she watched the collapsing ceiling.

In the midst of the fierce winter wind that followed the collapse of the fortress, Lydia Schmitt charged towards Ellen.

-Swoosh!

"Urgh!"

-Smash!

With a single punch, Ellen was flung into the debris of the collapsed fortress.

"Ugh… Hah…”

Her opponent was too strong.

She didn't even have a chance to react before she rushed in and attacked relentlessly.

-Smash! Crash! Bang! Swoosh!

If not for the protection of Lapelt, Lydia's fierce and violent assault would have

turned Ellen to pulp.

-Crash!

Lydia's body twitched when struck by Charlotte's spear of darkness, but it did not repel her as it had before.

The blizzard had weakened Charlotte's power by driving away the darkness.

-Smash!

"Ugh!"

Ellen barely dodged an incoming punch by rolling to the side, her face contorted with effort.

Like a spring, she regained her footing and quickly retreated, assuming a defensive posture.

If she could buy enough time, Lydia would run out of breath.

But Ellen didn't know that.

All she knew was that if things continued this way, both she and Charlotte would face death at the hands of the enigmatic Lydia Schmitt.

She would die if things continued like this.

She didn't want to die. There was still so much to learn, so many things to hear, questions to ask, all piled up like a mountain.

To die with everything left incomplete…

That was something she couldn't accept.

Not even in death.

Fearing and loathing the prospect of dying without knowing the truth.

Ellen clenches Lament once again.

If she doesn't want to die, she must win.

To win, she must be strong.

If she must lose and die because her opponent is stronger than herself.

She must become stronger.

Ellen Artorius steadies her breath.

'Slowly, from the whole body down to smaller units, becoming accustomed to focusing the Magic Body Strengthening on a single, extreme point.'

She recalls the words of Saviolin Tana.

'Precisely.'

Muttering.

While staring directly at the red knight approaching her.

-Whooooooosh!

Amid the harsh snowstorm of the north wind, which feels like it will tear her skin apart.

'Focus.'

She concentrates all her nerves.

'Eventually, I'll be able to concentrate the power in just the tips of my fingers like this.'

She doesn't want to die.

There are things she must know, words she must hear.

Forgiveness, revenge, or understanding. She doesn't know yet.

She cannot die without knowing where every story ends, and in which direction

every truth flows.

If she doesn't want to die, she must win.

And if she can't win as she is now.

'Well, then. And beyond this stage.'

She must become an existence that can win.

"Haaah……"

Ellen steadies her breath, concentrating her nerves to perceive the power within her body, down to the smallest fragments of mana.

If she doesn't want to die, she must not lose. To not lose, she must be stronger than her opponent.

There is only one path for Ellen, who must be stronger than her opponent.

Breaking through the barrier and taking the next step.

Beyond using Magic Body Strengthening.

She must go beyond becoming accustomed to Magic Body Strengthening and achieve the next stage.

'When you reach the limit of mana manipulation, such things become possible.'

The energy of Magic Body Strengthening flowing through Ellen's body gradually subsides from its burning state.

As if Magic Body Strengthening has become impossible.

Very thin, the blue light also fades.

Until it turns into a weak light that seems on the verge of going out.

It doesn't vanish.

It is compressed.

The extremely compressed mana stopped its unnecessary fluctuations solely for the purpose of defense.

And then.

In Ellen's hand holding Lament.

As if it were on fire, slowly.

The blue power flows through the sword.

Lydia Schmitt, who witnessed it, halted her steps.

"What is… this?"

An impossible event is unfolding before her eyes.

The flames of power attached to Lament soon engulfed the entire blade.

"Haaah……”

White breath escapes Ellen's lips and scatters in the winter wind.

Not a girl with a body ablaze with power, but a girl holding a sword ablaze with power.

'That's the condition for a Master Class.'

-Swish!

"……!"

In the next moment, Ellen Artorius thrust Lament toward Lydia Schmitt's heart.

Chapter 430

Lydia Schmitt stared wide-eyed at the sword of Ellen, which was embedded in her chest.

"What… how…?"

Awakening as a Swordmaster during a battle.

It was an unbelievable feat, yet someone had accomplished it right before her eyes.

She hadn't expected an easy fight and had even resorted to using the life-consuming power of Berserk.

Lydia had thought such occurrences only belonged in stories.

But the reality unfolding before her had already pierced her heart.

Shwook!

"Ugh… huff!"

As Ellen withdrew Lament, Lydia's legs gave way, and she slumped to the ground.

The girl wielding two relics had found it difficult to face her opponent and had become a Swordmaster with the power of the relics.

A genius beyond the word genius itself.

What had she been building up to all this time?

Could one truly become a Swordmaster so easily by gritting their teeth and focusing their mind in an unbeatable fight? Why did such beings exist in the world?

Lydia Schmitt was a genius.

She had never thought there would be so many geniuses on her level to trip her up.

Lydia felt a sense of awe.

In that moment, she felt something similar to when she had first seen Olivia Lanze.

A genius who had always been unrivaled, even among the geniuses gathered in the Temple Royal Class, someone she had never dared to approach.

A genius she had ultimately come to revere out of admiration and awe.

Was the girl before her also a genius of that caliber?

She had been born with an absurd talent, but there was something even more absurd about this existence.

Lydia Schmitt had been sacrificed to the absurd.

What would happen when these two visitors returned?

She didn't know the specifics, but she felt that a series of unfortunate events would unfold. That's why she had intended not to let them go.

But she had failed.

Something was bound to happen to Reinhardt and Eleris.

There was no healing power in the divine energy of Als.

Therefore, healing wounds like other Holy Knights was impossible for Lydia Schmitt.

The backlash from using Berserk, and the fatal wound.

Her consciousness was slipping away.

'I had hoped… they would return safely… '

"Cough!"

As she coughed up a mouthful of blood, Lydia Schmitt tried to grasp the fading edges of her consciousness, but it slipped away faster than she could reach.

She had hoped for Eleris's safe return, but instead, this had happened to her.

What would that vampire think of her death?

Lydia didn't know.

But she knew that the gentle vampire would shed tears for her.

The gods were said to plan everything.

Everything in the world was supposed to move according to their plans.

Was her death also part of such a plan?

'I don't know… '

Slowly closing her eyes, Lydia sank ceaselessly into the depths of unconsciousness.

If all of this was indeed the gods' plan.

She could no longer find a reason to love the gods.

—---

Kneeling before the lifeless body of Lydia Schmitt, Ellen silently faced the blizzard.

"What… What have you done?"

Charlotte asked in horror as she approached through the snowstorm.

"I had to win."

Ellen simply said that and unsummoned the Lament.

Awakening in the midst of battle.

It was during the battle that Ellen transitioned from Magic Body Strengthening to becoming a Swordmaster. But this time, she didn't collapse, vomiting blood like before.

Hmmm

Ellen checked the faintly glowing power of Magic Body Strengthening in her right hand.

Crackle!

Then, the mana boiling in her hand surged like flames, towering even higher than Ellen herself.

She couldn't refine it into the shape of a sword, but she could unleash it intensely.

Following partial Magic Body Strengthening came the external release.

Having such power meant she could avoid defeat, but wasn't this level of talent a bit strange?

She knew she wasn't ordinary, but this seemed excessive.

Ellen felt a peculiar sensation of unfamiliarity with herself, even as she was relieved to have escaped death.

Charlotte gazed at Lydia Schmitt's corpse, which was growing colder by the moment in the frigid winter wind.

"So, who was this person?"

Charlotte had watched the tournament but still couldn't identify the opponent even after the battle had ended.

"Sixth-year Royal Class, Lydia Schmitt. Though not a sixth-year anymore, based on last year's records."

“…Lydia Schmitt?"

At this, Charlotte furrowed her brow.

She had heard that name through other channels. She knew Lydia as a missing Temple Royal Class student, and the name of a student presumed dead in the Riverrier Lanze attack.

"I thought this person died during the previous Holy Knights raid. I heard she was suspected to be affiliated with the Nameless Monastery…"

"…Are you sure?"

"…I heard she had extremist tendencies. But how did you find out about the Nameless Monastery?"

"It wasn't difficult to learn."

Reinhardt had taken a black-haired Temple girl to Elena's shop.

There, Lydia Schmitt was with Elena's statue.

It became highly likely that the person accompanying Reinhardt was Lydia Schmitt.

Olivia Lanze had encountered Lydia Schmitt in the Unrestricted Tournament and forfeited.

Reinhardt had gone to watch that match. Afterward, even Olivia didn't know Reinhardt's whereabouts.

Olivia had been lured to the southern monastery of the Imperial Capital by the Nameless Monastery.

So, around that time, Reinhardt and Lydia Schmitt must have visited Elena's shop together.

And Lydia Schmitt wasn't dead during the Holy Knights raid but was in the fortress of Epiax.

Had she been kidnapped?

But they couldn't understand why she had attacked them.

"There's a place we need to go first."

Their original purpose for coming here was to examine Elena's statue.

An unexpected situation had arisen, causing confusion in their deduction of events,

but first, they had to verify something.

Part of the fortress of Epiax had collapsed, but only a portion; the rest of the building still stood intact.

"Is this… the place?"

"Yes."

The Pantheon.

Ellen and Charlotte arrived at a space lined with seven statues and looked around. Some of the statues were so weathered that their shapes were nearly unrecognizable, but they soon found themselves standing in front of their target statue.

Out of the seven statues, the only one Ellen and Charlotte could recognize was that of Elena. Some of the statues had been altered in appearance when they fell into human hands.

"It definitely… resembles her."

Charlotte slowly nodded as she compared the picture on Elena's ID card, which she held in her hand, to the statue.

Elena had claimed to be a dragon, and Ellen had vaguely guessed that this place might be something like a dragon lair.

"What is this place for? Why was that person here out of nowhere, and why did she try to kill us?"

Just as Charlotte said, it was all incomprehensible.

What exactly was the fortress of Epiax?

Why did Reinhardt go to Elena's shop with Lydia Schmitt?

Why was Lydia Schmitt, a member of the Nameless Monastery, isolated in a place

that seemed to be Elena's base?

Why did she try to kill them?

And.

That night, what did Reinhardt do?

"…"

Ellen silently stared at Elena's statue.

Olivia Lanze, who fell into a trap.

Lydia Schmitt, a member of the Nameless Monastery, must have known about the trap to lure Olivia Lanze out.

Elena was a powerful mage.

Let's assume that Reinhardt somehow learned about the Nameless Monastery's plan.

Then, given his character, Reinhardt would have tried to save Olivia.

Although it was impossible to know what kind of person Reinhardt truly was, it seemed so based on what they had seen so far.

The kidnapped Adriana.

Olivia, lured by using Adriana as bait.

Reinhardt, who learned about it through Lydia Schmitt.

"'…They saved you?'

'Yeah, I don't know why. The winged demon appeared and saved Adriana and me. Then it left us far away and disappeared somewhere. That's it.'

'Why on earth… '

'That's the most curious thing to me.'"

Olivia Lanze, who couldn't understand why the Demon King had saved her.

The Demon King might actually be a benevolent being, rather than one who harbored hatred for humans. No, now she seemed to despise humans.

It wasn't that he saved Olivia by chance while attacking the Holy Knights.

"Did he save her from the beginning…?"

Ellen clenched her teeth.

Dark emotions welled up within her heart.

Anger, betrayal.

And.

A sense of deprivation.

A peculiar emotion, the identity of which she couldn't grasp, began to envelop her entire body.

Regardless of what important secret Reinhardt held.

"So, that happened?"

"Yeah."

"No, why didn't you say it earlier… Sigh, well, it's pointless to argue about it now."

Charlotte, who had heard the inside story of the Holy Knights' raid from Ellen, crossed her arms and fell into deep thought.

Charlotte too followed a similar line of reasoning to Ellen.

Olivia, trapped in a scheme, and Adriana.

The two, who had managed to survive unharmed due to the Demon King's attack, were afraid of being accused of colluding with the Demon King if the world found out, and so kept quiet.

"And Reinhardt, after learning the truth from the two, took care of Adriana at the Rotary Club since it became difficult for her to find a place to stay… Right?"

"Yeah."

It wasn't unreasonable to say that Reinhardt tried to find a way to help in his own way.

However, both of them now knew about the suspicious circumstances that had occurred the previous day.

And the fact that Lydia Schmitt, who was most likely involved in the incident, was present at this location.

Both Adriana and Olivia were clearly unaware of the specifics.

Charlotte quietly sorted out the newly discovered facts. She didn't know about the existence of Lydia Schmitt and whether the Castle Epiax was actually related to the mage Elena.

But one thing was certain.

There was no more room for idle speculation.

It was time to stop thinking that it might not be true out of fear.

Now, they had to investigate Reinhardt.

To investigate Reinhardt, what must they do?

Charlotte's fingertips trembled.

It was not just because of the cold.

As they approached the core of the story and grasped the tip of the truth.

Charlotte found it increasingly difficult to bear the situation.

"…"

And it was no different for Ellen.

Chapter 431

Ellen and Charlotte returned to the Imperial Capital.

Ellen asked what they should do with Lydia Schmitt's corpse, but Charlotte insisted that they must take it with them as evidence.

The discovery of the missing person from the temple in the Epiax Fortress was a very serious issue, regardless of the truth of the case, and it could not be anything but a piece of evidence.

Acquiring a wooden coffin at a midway stop, they placed Lydia Schmitt's body inside and made their way back to the Imperial Capital.

It didn't take long to return to the Imperial Capital from the harsh frozen lands.

People stared curiously at Ellen, who was dragging the coffin, but neither of them was in a state to care about the gazes of others.

"Reinhardt must have gone to investigate the Lich's tomb. That's what I think," Charlotte said.

Ellen nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile, Reinhardt was still in Darkland, investigating the murder that had occurred in the Imperial Capital, accompanied by the Imperial elite and Harriet.

Neither Ellen nor Charlotte knew what Reinhardt wanted.

However, as they dragged the coffin towards the palace, Charlotte suddenly halted in her tracks.

"…"

Seeing Charlotte stop, Ellen stared intently at her.

Ellen silently watched as Charlotte's face twisted in pain and despair.

"Ellen…”

"Yes?"

"I… I can't do it."

Charlotte's voice trembled violently within her despair.

"I… this… with my own hands… I can't… I can't do this anymore…”

Knowing that the truth she was about to uncover would shatter her, Charlotte no longer had the courage to take another step forward.

She had thought she needed to know something, to dig deeper, but now she felt that she couldn't handle the terrifying truth that seemed to be right in front of her.

Both of them had an intuition about something.

But intuition alone could not solve anything.

They needed to uncover the truth and have some solid evidence to be certain. Ellen looked quietly at Charlotte.

"Alright."

"…”

Charlotte could not go any further.

Ellen was also afraid, but she couldn't blame Charlotte, for she understood the fear and reluctance that made her want to collapse.

Ellen was scared to dig deeper into the truth of this matter too.

Although she didn't intend to stop, Charlotte couldn't bear to see the truth she had uncovered with her own hands.

"Let's go to Bertus."

They needed another source of power.

—---

Bertus was having a busy time.

There was an incident inside the palace.

The Imperial elite had gone to search the Lich's tomb, but it was uncertain whether there really was a monster there.

So, not only were they searching the palace, but also the entire Imperial Capital and even Roswin's residence.

They were being extremely cautious in retrieving the magical tome left behind by Roswin, as there might be some trickery within it.

The Emperor was busy, of course, and the First Prince was doing his part as well.

Hence, it was inevitable that he would be annoyed by the sudden request for an audience from his sister, who seemed to have briefly visited a distant place over the weekend.

There was no time nor reason to discuss personal matters, let alone the already-finished psychological warfare, as he was already swamped with work.

However, when Bertus found out that Charlotte had not come alone but with Ellen Artorius, and that the two had brought a mysterious coffin to the Winter Palace, he sensed that something was amiss.

And after seeing their unusually thick coats, he was certain.

They must have brought something serious.

"What's going on?"

But being tired and sensitive, Bertus decided to have them sit down first before asking the main question.

Charlotte remained silent.

So did Ellen.

Instead, Charlotte took out a quill pen from the table and began writing something on a piece of paper.

But Bertus noticed that Charlotte's hand was trembling severely as she wrote.

“…Why are you like this?"

Charlotte remained silent in response to Bertus's question, her head lowered, continuing to write.

Why write when it could be said aloud?

It was because it contained the possibility of an unspeakable, miserable, and terrifying truth.

Her handwriting was messy due to her shaking hands, but it wasn't unreadable. Ellen was silently staring out the window.

Bertus didn't have the time, but he waited patiently for Charlotte to finish writing.

If the usually strong-willed half-sibling was resorting to this, it meant something very important was happening.

“…Here."

The densely written paper was handed over by Charlotte.

Bertus slowly began reading them.

It was a well-organized summary of everything Charlotte had discovered so far, though the handwriting was chaotic.

It included Charlotte's past knowledge about the Demon King's whereabouts, Elena's incident, letter delivery and evaporation, tracking, the attack on Riverrier Lanze, and Olivia and Adriana.

It mentioned the visit to the Castle Epiax, the incident with the statue, the attack by Lydia Schmitt, and even the claim that the missing Lydia Schmitt's body was in the coffin they brought.

Each of these stories seemed unrelated, but they all pointed to one person.

Reinhardt.

[There is a high possibility that Reinhardt is related to the Demon King.]

The horribly distorted writing spoke of Charlotte's wretched state of mind, having had to write it down herself.

Putting aside the certainty of the evidence and the basis of the content, the shock brought by the sentence itself left Bertus speechless.

"It's nonsense."

That's why Bertus's first words after a long silence could only be that.

"I wish… I wish it was. Please, I wish it was… I really do… I really… really…"

Before Bertus, Charlotte's head hung low, her hands resting on her knees.

Tears fell on them, and Bertus stared at her with wide eyes.

More than the unbelievable suspicion, Bertus was appalled by the fact that Charlotte was crying in front of him.

"I… I tried… I tried, but… I can't do it anymore… You… you might… be able to do it… If you do it…"

If Reinhardt was involved with the Demon King, it would be a huge shock to the empire and the royal family, but it would also mean they had caught a very serious security threat.

Just as Bertus had completely snatched the control of the imperial succession by eliminating the revolutionary forces, Charlotte could have used this to re-enter the competition for the throne.

But Charlotte, holding onto this lead, handed it over to Bertus.

She even pleaded with him.

Please finish the remaining task.

The truth she was already half-convinced of was too painful, so she asked Bertus, afraid that if she uncovered it all herself, she would fall apart.

No, she had already fallen apart.

Ellen, gazing silently out of the window, embraced Charlotte's shoulders without a word.

She pretended to be expressionless, but Ellen, who had investigated this with her, must have been in no better state than Charlotte.

Ellen was not expressionless.

She was devastated.

Bertus alternately looked at Charlotte and Ellen.

The broken half-siblings. The devastated classmate.

And Reinhardt.

Seeing Charlotte sobbing, Bertus put the paper in his bosom.

Reinhardt was involved with the Demon King.

What would happen if this were true?

He had no time to worry about trifling matters like the incident in the palace.

Bertus quietly looked at the half-siblings who had been on the brink of collapse, now completely broken and pleading with sobs.

If this were true.

What kind of betrayal would Charlotte de Gardias feel?

Being used, used again, and only being used in the end.

Betrayed by everything she had sought in her quest for peace of mind.

Bertus, more than ever, felt pity for his half-sibling.

With more sincerity than at any other moment, he said.

"Don't cry, sister."

"…"

"I'll take care of it."

And so, he spoke.

Charlotte returned to the Spring Palace, and Ellen stayed with Bertus.

Bertus and Ellen opened the archives guarded by the Winter Palace troops.

"Confirmation of identity?"

"It has been confirmed that she is indeed the missing Temple graduate, Lydia Schmitt."

"I see."

Even though Ellen had vouched for it, cross-verification had been completed.

The missing Temple Royal Class student, presumed dead during the attack on the nameless monastery, Lydia Schmitt, had been found in the northernmost fortress of the continent, known as the Fortress of Epiax.

Lydia Schmitt had attacked Ellen and Charlotte de Gardias for an unknown reason and had been killed in the process by Ellen Artorius.

And within the pantheon-like structure at the epicenter, there stood a statue of a sorcerer presumed to have hidden the Demon King.

The day before the attack on the Demon King's Holy Knights, Reinhardt visited

Elena's Scroll Shop with Lydia Schmitt.

Everything that needed to be known was diligently written by Charlotte and delivered without omission.

The conclusion was that Reinhardt was suspicious.

Ever since that cross-dressing incident he didn't want to recall, Bertus intentionally tried not to think about Reinhardt.

He had given up trying to understand why it had to be that way since it was an inexplicable situation.

'...This is driving me mad.'

If Reinhardt was connected to the Demon King, what was the meaning behind the cross-dressing?

Feeling that his thoughts were being drawn back to that incident, Bertus bit his tongue lightly to regain focus.

Ultimately, that cross-dressing incident.

Though he loathed the thought, Bertus couldn't deny that there was a clue there.

Bertus had already done something that Charlotte and Ellen didn't know and were too afraid to do themselves: digging into Reinhardt.

In a situation where Reinhardt wasn't thought to be suspicious, it could be dismissed, but if he was considered suspicious, it was an undeniable clue.

'The identity registration was last year, definitely.'

Last year.

His subordinate's report that many people lived without identity registration was correct.

However, when viewed from the perspective that Reinhardt was suspicious, it was strange.

Reinhardt suddenly appeared in the Empire last year.

Reinhardt didn't exist before then, at least not two years prior.

And another clue.

Reinhardt had admitted that the silver-haired girl he had encountered that day was him.

Why would he confess such an abominable act with his own mouth? So every time Bertus and Reinhardt met, they experienced bizarre situations.

There was no real need to mention it.

'It was me.'

Nevertheless, upon hearing that Bertus was investigating to find his siblings, Reinhardt blurted out the truth in a fit of panic.

Bertus didn't know why Reinhardt had cross-dressed.

The important thing was that Reinhardt had confessed something he should never have admitted under normal circumstances.

'Did he fear the investigation itself?'

He might have been afraid that Bertus would discover something he shouldn't know, so he confessed the truth before Bertus could touch any dangerous leads.

The embarrassment and risking death were problems of different dimensions.

Reinhardt had participated in the cross-dressing contest. The reason was unknown.

But as soon as he heard that Bertus was investigating under the assumption that the girl might be Reinhardt's sibling, he confessed the truth.

That meant,

If Bertus continued investigating Reinhardt, he would learn something he shouldn't.

"Bring me the date of Reinhardt's identity registration and the date Charlotte returned to the Empire for comparison."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And Ellen."

"Yes?"

"There's a Rotary Club in the southern part of the Empire. Do you know?"

“…Yes, I do."

Upon hearing Bertus's question, Ellen nodded her head.

"Take the people and interrogate them. If necessary, bring them all in."

“…Understood."

Ellen slowly nodded her head and led the people selected by Bertus out of the palace.

Bertus quietly watched Ellen's retreating figure.

Was Reinhardt truly a sudden appearance?

And when did it all begin?

Just what was Reinhardt up to?

Bertus wanted to know.

The image of Charlotte sobbing miserably wouldn't leave Bertus's mind.

Chapter 432

"Uncle Daibun, where has my sister gone?"

"Your sister? I think she might return tomorrow or the day after. She had some business to attend to and went out for a while."

"I see."

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason, I just haven't seen her since yesterday."

Adriana casually exchanged these words as she held the laundry basket and hung the clothes on the line outside. Other club members who were free at the time also helped Adriana with the laundry, hanging it up and folding the ones that were already dry and crisp.

Adriana had been staying at the Rotary Club for several months.

She had grown accustomed to life here.

Everyone in the club was now living like proper human beings.

Of course, at the time Adriana started living here, the Rotary Club's income was already stable, but many people still couldn't break away from their shabby lifestyles.

However, quite a lot had changed since Adriana's arrival.

The most important aspect was hygiene.

The club leader, who should have set an example for everyone, had a severely poor hygiene, and there were quite a few members who were no better.

Once Adriana began to thoroughly wash Loyar and even check her nails, everyone else became more conscious of maintaining their cleanliness.

Everyone couldn't believe that the fierce and ill-tempered dog turned into a pet-like creature in front of Adriana.

Eventually, Adriana took on the role of managing the cleanliness, housekeeping, and hygiene of the Rotary Club headquarters.

More than anything, seeing Adriana, who would become restless and look for something to do when left alone, everyone began to find chores to do themselves, such as cleaning.

In the end, one way or another, Adriana had become a source of vitality that encouraged the older Rotary Club members to live more diligently.

The sight of the young girl working so hard made them think it would be shameful to be adults who just drank and loafed around.

As a result, even though Adriana didn't say anything, the incidents of people getting drunk and passing out on the floor or vomiting had stopped.

Now, even when they drank alcohol, they would have one or two glasses in a reserved manner, and when it was bedtime for Adriana, everyone would quietly go to their rooms and sleep. A culture of consideration had been established.

They thought it would be inappropriate to be noisy while a child was trying to sleep.

And so, Adriana unknowingly became like a daughter to everyone at the Rotary Club.

During these months, Adriana also learned about some of the club's characteristics.

Loyar spent most of his day lying on the couch in the reception room on the top floor of the club headquarters or going for a walk with Adriana. She didn't really have any other tasks.

In other words, she was just like a house dog, guarding her spot and nothing more.

The business of the Rotary Club was managed by the subordinates, and Loyar didn't know exactly what was going on or how much income was coming in.

Instead, the situation was gradually changing, with Adriana discussing matters that required Loyar's approval and then relaying them to Loyar.

No matter what they talked about, Loyar simply told them to handle it as they saw fit.

One day, Adriana asked Daibun, "What kind of work does your leader do?"

Daibun responded that when they lived under the bridge, there was quite a lot for her to do.

Typically, she would protect club members during fights with other beggar groups and retaliate on their behalf if any of them were hurt in a conflict with thugs.

She even managed to get money from somewhere, and Daibun told Adriana that Loyar was an indispensable presence when they were part of the beggar group under the bridge.

Now that the situation had improved, Loyar simply had no tasks to perform.

Adriana thought it was fortunate that there were no more fight-related matters to deal with.

Despite her rough appearance, it was quite fascinating to hear how skilled Loyar was at fighting.

Most club members had seen Loyar fight, and many had even been on the receiving end of her blows.

Everyone praised her fighting skills as nothing short of supernatural.

In any case, as far as Adriana knew, Loyar used to play a crucial role in the club but now had little to do, as their circumstances had improved.

Nevertheless, Loyar would disappear for a few days about once a month.

Adriana only knew that Loyar went out for some reason, but Loyar would suddenly leave and return a few days later without further explanation.

The club members simply accepted it as a usual occurrence.

Now that Loyar had no more fighting to do, Adriana wondered what she was doing on those trips.

Adriana was curious, but Loyar merely brushed it off, saying she had some business to attend to and provided no further details.

So, Adriana simply thought that it must be something she didn't know about.

It was on one such day.

There had been surprising events, such as the murder case at the royal palace, the dark cloud hanging over the world, and Ellen, Reinhardt, and Olivia becoming the owners of the sacred relics. However, Reinhardt didn't visit the Rotary Club very often, so there was no time to discuss these matters.

Thus, Adriana spent her days at the club headquarters, which, despite being in the imperial capital, seemed somewhat detached from the world.

On one ordinary afternoon, Adriana was cleaning the reception room on the top floor of the club. She was engrossed in picking up the long, thin strands of hair that had fallen on the sofa.

It felt like she was sweeping up animal fur.

From a distance, Adriana could see a group approaching the club.

It wasn't unusual for outsiders to visit the club, but something about their demeanor seemed off.

And at the very front of the group, there was a familiar face that Adriana knew.

It was Ellen Artorius, the younger sister of the hero Ragan Artorius and the known possessor of the holy artifact, Lament. She was walking towards the club headquarters, leading the soldiers.

The recently revealed truth was astonishing, but to Adriana, Ellen was more strongly associated as a friend of Reinhardt.

And she had heard that Ellen would sometimes come to the club, get thoroughly beaten by her sister, and then leave.

Everyone at the club was somewhat in awe when they learned that Ellen was actually the sister of the hero, sticking their tongues out in amazement.

Although Adriana was now treated as the club's darling, Ellen was also acquainted with everyone at the club, and people liked her just the same.

Now, with a serious expression on her face, Ellen was approaching the club with heavily armed soldiers in tow.

"What's going on…?"

As an ominous feeling settled in the air, the club members who were outside went to approach Ellen.

Contrary to the sinister premonition, Ellen began to have a conversation with the club members. There were no signs of violence being used.

However, one by one, the soldiers began approaching Ellen and the other club members to start conversations.

The content of the conversations could not be heard.

What could be happening?

Just as she was considering going out to see for herself, someone called her name.

"Adriana."

Daibun, who had arrived without her noticing, urgently grabbed Adriana's arm.

"Mr. Daibun?"

"Follow me."

Without any explanation, Daibun began to drag Adriana down the stairs.

"What's happening outside…?"

"I'm not sure. But it seems like something serious is going on."

Daibun hurriedly led Adriana down the stairs, as if there was something they needed to do before the soldiers entered the club headquarters.

They arrived at the club's basement storage room.

In a place filled with food supplies and unsold items from the magic train store, Daibun pressed Adriana against the wall and looked at her.

"Adriana, don't ask questions. Just follow the path I'm going to open for you."

"Y-yes?"

"Under the southern tower of Bronze Gate, where our old club used to be, there's a passage leading to the underground sewer of the Imperial City."

Daibun's expression was so serious that Adriana couldn't even bring herself to question him.

"Go deep into that sewer, and you'll find your sister there."

"My sister? Why would she be there…"

"It's difficult to explain everything. Adriana, do you care about your sister?"

"Yes? Y-yes, of course."

Adriana was grateful and thankful to Loyar, who treated her with care even though she found everything bothersome. She now thought of Loyar as family.

There was no reason to dislike someone who protected and cherished her unconditionally.

"Follow the sewer and find your sister. And tell her never to come back here."

"I don't understand… what you're saying…"

But Daibun had already manipulated something on the wall, revealing a hidden secret passage within the basement.

Why on earth was there something like this in the basement of the Rotary Club?

It was as if someone had intentionally created it for someone to escape.

Adriana couldn't tell.

Daibun stared at Adriana with wide eyes, as if there wasn't much time to explain.

"After you tell my sister, get out of the sewer quickly. You must get out quickly. After you deliver the message, do not be with her. Never."

-Thump

-Creak

Upstairs, ominous thudding sounds and the creaking of doors opening could already be heard.

"Adriana, after delivering the message, you must part with your sister before nightfall."

Daibun grasped both of Adriana's shoulders, as if to emphasize not to forget, and repeated the words once more.

Adriana didn't think she knew much about the Rotary Club. She simply did her part in that place, and she considered herself to be just beginning to learn about the true work of the Rotary Club.

However, Adriana suddenly realized that she truly knew nothing.

She didn't know why there was a secret passage in the basement of the Rotary Club headquarters.

"Hah… Hah…"

All Adriana did was run.

She didn't know why Ellen had come to the Rotary Club headquarters with soldiers, or what exactly they were asking about.

She didn't know what Loyar was doing in the underground sewer.

Why was she being told to deliver the message to Loyar and then part ways before nightfall?

Adriana knew nothing.

Fearing that dangerous events might unfold for everyone, Adriana ran and ran to carry out the desperate request Daibun had made.

The secret passage wasn't very long.

Adriana gently pushed up something like a manhole cover and emerged outside.

Instead of the main street, a forest thick with trees appeared.

Since it was an exit that wouldn't be noticed by human eyes, Adriana ran towards the main street visible in the distance.

Chapter 433

Adriana possessed physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary people, which allowed her to reach the Bronze Gate Tower quickly.

However, the sun was slowly setting.

Daibun had said that she had to part ways with Loyar once night fell. Although the reason was unknown, it was certain that she had to meet Loyar before nightfall.

Before the Rotary Club's occupation, they had been living for a long time beneath the Bronze Gate Tower, one of the many large bridges in the Imperial Capital.

The Bronze Gate Tower, now devoid of the candy peddlers, had regained its original appearance as a pleasant walkway that people were beginning to avoid.

Adriana could see the long passage leading under the Bronze Gate Tower and beneath the bridge.

There was no sign forbidding entry, and during the Rotary Club's occupation, the area was always teeming with beggars, so people didn't bother entering.

Yet even with the beggars gone, the deep, dark sewer opening invoked an innate sense of fear in people.

No one would willingly enter such a place.

What was her sister doing in such a place? And did all members of the Rotary Club know about this?

Adriana chose a different path from the many strolling people, walking toward the sewer.

With the departure of the Rotary Club, the makeshift houses made of patched-up boards had all been demolished.

The sewer, where beggars used to huddle together and vomit from cheap alcohol,

was now clean as if no such vermin had ever resided there.

The Rotary Club members had lived here for quite some time.

How did they endure the sweltering summers and freezing winters?

Even in this urgent situation, Adriana couldn't help but worry about them.

In the heat and cold, these people with nowhere else to turn huddled together and relied on each other to overcome the hardships.

It was Loyar whom they all trusted and depended on.

In the already sorrowful life of the beggars, when gangsters threatened and belittled them, Loyar always protected the club members.

Eventually, Loyar became so fearsome that no one dared to mess with the Rotary Club members.

Before she knew it, Adriana had ventured deep into the sewer, where not even a single lantern shone.

As the surroundings were pitch-black, Adriana summoned a sphere of light and slowly walked into the sewer.

The sewer was not a straight path. It was long and vast, but there were branching sections, and Adriana couldn't tell where Loyar might be.

She couldn't help but be astonished at the existence of such a massive underground waterway beneath the Imperial Capital.

There was no reason to imagine something she couldn't see.

In this lengthy and vast sewer, Loyar was somewhere.

What on earth was she doing here?

Fearing that she might lose her way, Adriana decided to move only forward, considering her return. That way, when it was time to go back, she would only have to go straight back.

The orb of light could not illuminate the entirety of the vast sewer system.

As time went on, Adriana could not help but grow increasingly anxious.

It had been close to sunset when they entered, so night would fall soon.

She had to find Loyar quickly. Judging by Daibun's expression, there was a clear connection between night and Loyar.

How long had she been walking?

"Adriana?"

A distant echo came from somewhere within the sewer.

Undoubtedly, it was Loyar's voice.

"Sister?"

Adriana's words were met with a distant stir.

"Adriana, why are you here…"

A figure approached, illuminated by the light orb Adriana held.

Now, thanks to Adriana's diligent grooming and care, a clean and well-maintained Loyar walked towards her.

"How did you know to come here?"

Loyar, who had come closer, couldn't hide her puzzled expression as she gently touched Adriana's face.

"There were lots of soldiers at the club. I don't know what's going on… but Daibun said I'd find you here."

"Daibun? How did that guy…? And what do you mean, soldiers?"

Loyar tilted her head, seemingly unable to understand what she was hearing.

"I don't know. Daibun said… not to go back to the club under any circumstances. That's what he said."

"Don't go back? And what about the soldiers?"

"I don't know. Ellen was with heavily armed soldiers, questioning the club members. So Daibun sent me through the secret passage in the club's basement, telling me to pass on the message…"

Although Adriana didn't know the whole story, it was Loyar who seemed even more unable to understand the situation.

"A secret passage? Why is there one in the headquarters?"

"…You didn't know?"

No, how could her sister not know!

Despite the urgency of the situation, Adriana wanted to scream.

"And… after I deliver the message, I should part ways with you quickly… before nightfall…"

At those words, Loyar's expression hardened.

As if now, everything that had been incomprehensible suddenly made sense.

"Ah… those bastards… they knew everything all along…"

Watching Loyar's expression, a mix of helplessness, loss, and a surge of overwhelming emotion, Adriana could feel some kind of passion, even though she didn't fully understand the situation.

Adriana wiped her face several times. She saw moisture shimmering at the corners of Loyar's eyes.

Just as Daibun had done, Loyar now gripped Adriana's shoulders.

"Yes, Adriana. I can't explain in detail, but I understood well enough what you're telling me. So, as Daibun said, leave here quickly. And don't go back to the club

either."

"Sister, what's going on? What… what's happening?"

Adriana trembled with an indiscernible fear.

"Adriana, you should not know. It's better not to know about such things."

Loyar lowered her head in response to Adriana's question.

"Not knowing is better for you."

"Big sister… I'm scared. Are we… never going to see each other again?"

Unaware of the cause, she loses something.

Olivia was almost sacrificed in the nameless monastery for reasons unknown even to herself.

Now, Adriana began to sob, not knowing the reason, and fearing that she might not see the people she had just grown close to, and even Loyar, again.

Loyar's eyes were filled with determination.

As if trying to forcefully suppress and swallow some boiling emotion.

"Go! There's no time to take care of a child like you!"

"Bu-but, big sister…"

Seeing Loyar's anger for the first time, Adriana stepped back a few paces.

"Hurry… Hurry up and go… Night is coming… When night falls… I won't recognize you anymore…"

What was it about the night?

Adriana didn't understand what Loyar was saying.

Something terrifying was happening.

Now that the chain of events had begun, the only thing Adriana had to do was run away.

From all of this.

And from Loyar, who was about to face the night.

Soon, Adriana could see Loyar's expression contort in agony as she tried to send her away.

"Damn… Damn it."

As if sensing something.

From the darkness behind them, a soft voice echoed through the sewers.

“I found you here.”

Inside the white light Adriana had created, someone was walking towards them.

“Auntie.”

The cloak of the sun god.

Ellen Artorius, wielding the sword of the Moon God, was slowly approaching them.

Loyar stared at the approaching Ellen with wide eyes.

Adriana could see it too.

Ellen was surrounded by an aura like blue mist, and the divine sword of the Moon God, Lament, seemed to be burning with blue flames.

"Sword… Master?"

Adriana mumbled, her voice drained of energy.

"You… You monster… When did you get there…?"

Loyar was just as astonished.

"I have many questions. About things I haven't tried to find out until now, things I thought were strange but didn't ask… Now I'm going to ask."

Ellen quietly stared at Loyar, who had beaten her down countless times.

"So, you have to be honest with me."

As if prepared for a fight but not making the first move, Ellen spoke to Loyar while maintaining her Aura Sword and Aura Armor.

Loyar stared silently at Ellen.

She had thought that this monster's growth rate surpassed that of a criminal or even a genius.

But to have become a Sword Master already.

And from her gaze and demeanor, it seemed she was already certain of something.

The younger sister of the hero.

Ellen Artorius.

Could she escape?

No.

Loyar's intuition told her.

Escape was impossible. Not because of Ellen's skills.

Time was drawing near.

"Little black-haired girl."

Addressing someone who had already crossed the line into the realm of the inhuman, a precious person to her lord.

"Defeat me."

"…?"

"Defeat me, no matter what."

Ellen furrowed her brow at Loyar's strange words.

Still in a daze, Adriana's shoulder was grasped by Loyar.

And then—

-Whoosh!

"Ah, sister!"

"!"

Loyar threw Adriana towards Ellen, who hastily unsummoned Lament and caught her.

Loyar knew that the lord had gone far away for a dangerous task.

But Loyar couldn't go with him.

Born with a fate to fall into an unrecognizable madness every full moon night, she could not follow Valier.

Would her cursed fate become the lord's curse as well?

Ellen didn't understand what Loyar was saying.

But, holding the bewildered Adriana, she summoned Lament again.

"Sister… why? Ellen, why…?"

"Step back."

Ellen silently looked at Loyar.

The night of the full moon was approaching.

-Groooowl

"Grrr… grrrrr…”

Her snout elongated, and white fur began to sprout all over Loyar's body.

Adriana's face turned pale at the sight, and Ellen clenched her teeth.

"The White… Beast… Lycan… Sloth…”

The white beast that had appeared during the Demon King's assault.

Lycan Sloth.

There was no stronger evidence than this.

Taking the long and winding road.

Connecting the countless events of the past.

At last.

Ellen reached a clear conclusion.

"…”

A tear fell from Ellen's eye.

"Ah, sis… sister…?"

Adriana realized what she had heard as she watched Loyar transform into Lycan Sloth.

The reason Loyar had occasionally been absent for days.

Tonight was the night of the full moon.

The one she had given her heart and will to was not human.

-Growl

"Grrrrr…”

Seeing the transformed Loyar as the white beast, Ellen's tears continued to flow, her eyes full of determination.

"But, it can't… it can't be… why… why…”

Adriana too, began to cry in terror and horror, trembling in shock.

Defeat me.

Ellen understood what those words meant.

"Senior, step back."

It must have meant that she didn't want to hurt Adriana.

The person who had always beaten her and tried to kill her at first sight.

Ellen Artorius finally understood what her killing intent had been.

Then why.

Why indeed.

Some questions were answered, but the answers only led to more questions.

-Grrrrrr.

The low growling of the white beast echoed ominously throughout the sewer. Ellen took a deep breath, facing the white beast that had revealed its true form, a form it could no longer hide.

The white beast had lost its reason.

"Ma'am…”

Facing Lycan Sloth, who crouched and prepared to charge.

Irene's hunting dog.

No.

Great River Irene.

The white wolf of that place.

The white wolf of the Great River.

"Things will be different now."

Swordmaster Ellen Artorius raised her sword.

Chapter 434

The Quantum Maze can be breached.

However, it was uncertain if Archlich and Antirianus would be able to enter Akasha after breaking through the Quantum Maze.

The important thing was that there were no plans to let them reach the entrance of Akasha.

I wasn't sure if I could even gain a slight advantage against the archmage.

But what mattered was the Alsbringer, which made me stronger the stronger my opponent was.

And Tiamata, a relic optimized for battles against the undead.

With Eleris's assistance on top of that.

By overcoming these two obstacles, I would reach the end of this story.

The Gate Incident would not occur.

The Demon King would quietly disappear.

Adopting the name Reinhardt as my true name, I would spend the remainder of my time.

Eliminating one by one the seeds of chaos sown throughout the empire and the continent.

Uprooting each and every possibility of turmoil I had spread, and those that had spread because of me.

I would find peace of mind through the world's peace.

Although I still didn't know how to resolve the many twisted relationships and lies, I

believed that somehow, it would work out.

I needed to think more about whether I should tell the truth to those who would feel betrayed by me, and if so, how to tell them.

Now that I knew that doing nothing was the best course of action, I hoped for everything to converge peacefully as I remedied the situations I had set in motion.

With a start, Eleris and I opened the door of Akasha.

A long, long corridor.

Someone was standing in the middle of the Quantum Maze.

As if he had been waiting.

"You've already arrived, great one."

The old vampire smiled at me, holding a skull in his right hand.

"It seems you already know everything…"

Like we knew about Akasha, it appeared that Antirianus had also learned about Akasha.

But before that, the skull held in Antirianus's right hand.

I narrowed my eyes as I looked at it.

"Antirianus, what is that?"

"Ah, are you asking about this…?"

Antirianus threw it toward me.

It felt more like he was rolling it rather than attacking.

The skull rolled to my feet.

"Do you understand if I say it belonged to the Archlich?"

"It was the remnant of the leader of Cantus Magna we were searching for. The skull of Lukren."

As soon as the skull touched my feet, it crumbled into dust and disappeared. The black dust into which the skull had transformed didn't look ordinary.

"Antirianus, what do you want?"

At Eleris's hostile tone, the elder bowed his head slightly.

"Sadly, everyone in the Council… misunderstands me. Of course, I understand why…"

"…"

"I don't really have any such intentions."

The purpose behind the elder's smile remained inscrutable.

"If there is anything, I told you before."

"Joy."

"I am prepared to enjoy both your success and your failure, so I am entirely willing to cooperate with you."

"In that situation, I had to briefly hold Lukren's hand in order to find out what Akasha was and where it was located. I had no intention of betraying you."

"So I found out what Akasha was and got rid of the now-useless Lukren."

"I came here to locate Akasha, and I have no interest in such trivial matters as becoming a god."

Antirianus looked at me with a cold smile.

Amusement.

Was that the only reason for his cooperation, and he had no interest in possessing a powerful artifact like Akasha?

It was hard to believe, but Antirianus seemed to be genuine as he looked at me and Eleris with a smile.

"I believe the world is interesting because it's unpredictable," he said.

"In a world where I can control everything and everything goes according to plan, what interest or pleasure could I find?"

"Becoming a god in some world would be like a child's sand play, just on a larger scale."

"Your Excellency."

"I enjoy stories where waves and tidal waves crash into sandcastles built by children, and storms rage."

"I like stories where a desperate child, trying to protect their painstakingly built sandcastle, either achieves something or sinks into the depths of despair, unable to do anything."

"I want to see stories that are unpredictable, but enjoyable just by watching."

"However, I cannot tolerate a skeleton lost in the delusion of becoming a god trying to steal the ending of such a story."

"I hope you will take Akasha."

"You don't seem to be the type to indulge in the desire to become a god. You seem to love more human, emotional, and trivial matters."

"I enjoy stories of people risking their lives for such trivial things."

"Your Excellency."

"Please tell me a story that is either exceedingly joyous or exceedingly despairing."

Antirianus bowed his head to me.

Insane.

That was the only thought that came to mind.

He wanted to help me find out what Akasha was, offer it to me, and then assist me in whatever I did afterward out of curiosity.

My despair as well.

My happiness too.

It was a story that would surely be entertaining, and he intended to derive pleasure from simply observing it.

Eleris bit her lip, seemingly at a loss for words, as she looked at Antirianus's sincere but mad attitude.

"You've gone mad from the boredom of time, Antirianus."

"Didn't I tell you before, Lady of the Fire?"

Antirianus's eerie vampire eyes shone.

"After living for an absurdly long time, how could I possibly be sane?"

He had achieved everything he wanted, possessed everything he desired.

Yet he didn't want to die, so he became a vampire and lived for an unbearably long time since then.

Thus, now devoid of even desire, he found pleasure in witnessing the joy or despair of others.

"Of course, the screams and pleas of Lukren before his death provided me with great amusement. The death of an old undead who could not fulfill his long-held desire and faced a meaningless end…"

"Merely watching it brought me immeasurable joy."

Antirianus looked at me.

"Of course, I am not fit to partake in the pleasure of carrying out such acts. An old,

worn-out wretch like myself is not suited for the role of a protagonist."

Antirianus had been helpful so far.

This level of madness was, rather, reassuring. He had no reason to claim the Akasha, nor anything he wanted to do with it.

I couldn't even be angry at his excessive malice, which was content to just watch my success or failure and snicker in the background.

"Anyway, Antirianus, are you saying you'll be on my side?"

"You shouldn't trust me too much, of course. I am capable of both actions for your happiness and actions for your misfortune."

His honesty, bordering on repulsiveness, left me speechless.

Antirianus had killed Archlich. The legacy of Cantus Magna was completely severed.

Antirianus still had his head bowed.

"If you cannot trust me, you may use the sacred relic of purity to strike my neck. O, exalted being."

"…"

As if to show he would not resist, Antirianus offered his neck.

If he couldn't witness my end, would he really risk his life?

Should I kill him?

Madness is unpredictable.

Antirianus betrayed us at the critical moment and reached the place where the Akasha was in a single stride. We arrived first and understood the truth, but we couldn't know if he tried to take the Akasha for himself.

We couldn't know the future, nor what Antirianus was thinking.

However, he had been a great help so far.

Incomprehensible madness can become trustworthy when it exceeds an unfathomable level.

A madman this far gone wouldn't change his mind for a petty motive.

“…You madman."

I decided to trust Antirianus's madness.

Yes.

Let's go together with this crazy old man.

Until the very end.

Eleris was left behind with the Akasha.

Naturally, since we couldn't predict what Antirianus would do, we couldn't let him near the Akasha.

Antirianus was untrustworthy, but he had killed Archlich, a very dangerous problem.

We didn't know how far he would be on our side or when he would stab us in the back, but for now, he was lending us a hand.

Antirianus was truly useful, and all he wanted from me was amusement.

If a powerful existence like Antirianus fully cooperates in exchange for being an audience to my life, it's not such a bad deal, is it?

First, I had to meet Charlotte.

And Ellen, too.

I didn't know how to explain the truth, and I wasn't sure whether I should tell Charlotte about the existence of Akasha, but I had to see her first.

Through Antirianus, I returned to the Imperial Palace by mass teleportation.

There was certainly an issue about explaining how I disappeared from the Lich's tomb and reappeared at the palace in some way.

How should I go about revealing the deception I had played on everyone so far?

Antirianus decided to head to the Lich's tomb and report the details to the Vampire Council and the Black Order.

"Will you be alright? They must think you're a traitor by now."

"I believe it'll work out somehow."

Wearing a snake-like smile, Antirianus disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Well, is it time for me to worry about Antirianus?

I walked through an alley in the Imperial Palace and went out to the street.

If I successfully hide Akasha, I'll have to rectify the deeds I've done as the Demon King. Gradually sorting out the affairs of the Devil's Cult, one by one.

I cannot know for certain whether I should complete Akasha and create a new world for the demons to migrate to.

Sarkegaar would wholeheartedly agree with that plan.

If I were to take the demons to the new world, and if my ability to control the demons becomes stronger than it is now, perhaps I could become a god-like being in the new world.

A god-like being, what a tasteless thing. If I were to attempt such a thing, Antirianus might try to kill me out of boredom.

I walked down the road, stood at the entrance of the temple, and as always, passed through the gate.

But somehow…

There was a different kind of unease than before.

Everyone seemed to be…

Looking at me.

Particularly the guards, including those at the temple gate, watching me with an uneasy feeling.

As soon as they saw me, their muscles tensed as if they were on edge.

Suspicion.

And doubt.

Furthermore, fear.

Because of this unease, when I passed through the gate and looked back, I encountered a strange sight.

The guards had already moved to block my retreat.

And then…

“…Bertus?"

Bertus, who had been sitting on a bench somewhere, slowly walked towards me.

Why was Bertus here in the middle of this deep night?

Bertus usually seemed to wear a slightly frivolous smile. Unmasked, he had a somewhat gloomy grin.

But this Bertus was different.

He wore a menacing and hardened expression, a look of Bertus I had never seen before.

His face was full of fury beyond his control.

Why?

"I don't understand."

Bertus, surrounded by countless knights, looked at me.

"I can't comprehend this situation at all."

Bertus spoke as he looked at me.

"Why… is it you?"

Confusion, anger, and a sense of betrayal mixed within Bertus, who seemed unable to understand the situation himself.

Ah.

That's what it was.

I felt something inside me shatter.

Was it too late?

No.

Had it been like this from the beginning?

Was it my destiny to reach the conclusion of everything and end up like this?

Just one more step to go.

Was it my destiny not to take that final step?

"Capture him."

At Bertus's brief command, people moved.

My arms were bound, and my eyes were covered.

But that wasn't all.

"They say he uses a power called the Word Magic. Gag him to prevent any nonsense," Bertus ordered curtly, and my mouth was sealed shut as well.

The one consolation was that among my possessions, only the Flame of Tuesday had been taken away. I still had the invisible ring of Sarkegaar, which allowed me to maintain Reinhardt's appearance.

Since it was a tool for concealment and disguise, the Dreadfind tribe's treasure would have been undetectable during a body search, as long as I didn't remove it myself.

I was dragged off to some unknown location by the knights.

Something had gone wrong.

I didn't know to what extent they suspected me, but Bertus knew something.

I had no idea how things had gone awry, but I had accumulated around 100,000 achievement points by now. Could I not resolve the situation with Word Magic?

In some building within the temple, and a place presumed to be deep underground.

Clink! Clink!

The sound of rattling chains echoed.

And there was no way I wouldn't realize it when my blindfold was removed.

Unraveling the suspicion was impossible.

Grrrrrr……

Just like me, a Lycansloth, gagged, was confined within an iron-barred cell.

Was it red fur?

No.

It was blood, and its original fur was white.

A white Lycansloth, its entire body covered in blood.

Clink! Clink!

Bound by chains, the Lycansloth writhed and struggled with madness in its eyes. But no matter what kind of chain it was bound with, the chain only tightened and never broke.

Loyar.

And full moon.

Even without knowing the specifics, there was no other way to understand it.

Loyar had been captured.

And Loyar had revealed her true form during the Demon King's attack.

"Do you need more explanation?"

Bertus, standing beside me, asked coldly.

Even if I didn't know how we reached this point, the conclusion was clear.

It was now confirmed that I was either a servant of the Demon King or the Demon King himself.

Even so…

I tried to use Word Magic.

Even if they knew I was the Demon King, they would trust me.

They would believe in my intentions.

[The requested Word Magic operation cannot be performed.]

It was decided that I would kneel before the mountain of lies I had built myself.

So, of course, it was impossible.

Chapter 435

The Temple.

"…"

Ellen lay in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"It seems Reinhardt has… returned."

"…"

Charlotte, who had gone out for a brief chat, came back and told Ellen as much.

Ellen had faced death several times in the battle against Loyar.

Even as a Swordmaster, Lycansloth's power, amplified by the full moon, was difficult to handle.

Lament and Lapelt.

Without the two relics, she might have been defeated.

Battered and bruised, Ellen managed to subdue Lycansloth and dragged her unconscious body to the sewer entrance before passing out.

The remaining tasks were taken care of by the soldiers and knights who had followed Ellen.

The priests' healing had improved her condition, but the exhaustion felt as if her body would break had not yet subsided.

Adriana had been captured.

Charlotte was told that she was not involved, but the outcome of the incident remained uncertain.

The two pursued the truth and arrived at it in just two days.

Collecting the scattered clues was not difficult.

However, coping with the easily discovered truth was another matter.

"Ellen."

"Yes?"

Unable to look Ellen in the eye, Charlotte asked hesitantly.

"Is Reinhardt… the Demon King?"

Ellen continued to stare at the ceiling.

He might not be the Demon King, but Reinhardt could be the Demon King's servant.

Yet that once playful confession had now become the final puzzle piece.

All the arrows of doubt and suspicion pointed at Reinhardt.

"Yes."

With her gaze unfocused, Ellen quietly replied.

"That's likely. I'm certain."

Reinhardt was the Demon King.

The Temple was silent.

The news of the hero Reinhardt being suspected of being the Demon King and arrested was kept top secret.

Those who knew even a little about the situation were tight-lipped.

Moreover, the empire's elite forces, including Saviolin Turner, who had gone to Darkland, returned after being called by the empire without finding the missing Reinhardt.

Naturally, this included the Duke of Saint Owan and Harriet.

Harriet, who had been pacing anxiously due to their failure to find the missing Reinhardt, turned pale beyond belief upon hearing the Duke of Saint Owan's account after his audience with the Emperor.

"W-What do you mean, Father…?"

The Duke of Saint Owan was just as perplexed by the situation.

"His Majesty said that the possibility of Reinhardt being the Demon King is very high…"

"Wh…? What does that mean?"

Harriet, who had never even considered such a thing, doubted her ears even though she had heard the words clearly.

The Duke of Saint Owan briefly conveyed the investigation process of Charlotte and Ellen and Bertus' final instructions that he had heard from the Emperor.

Harriet was not so slow-witted as to be unable to understand the whole story.

But she couldn't believe it.

"There must be some misunderstanding… There has to be. It can't be true, Father. Reinhardt… Reinhardt is human. He's a person… How could Reinhardt be…?"

Shivering, Harriet was carefully embraced by the Grand Duke.

"That's right. If there's a misunderstanding, it will be cleared up."

"Yes, there must be some misunderstanding. Surely…"

In her faint consciousness, Reinhardt's last words echoed in Harriet's head.

'I wanted to save everyone… '

There was no way that Reinhardt, who said such a thing, could be the Demon King.

There was no way.

But Harriet clearly remembered the presence beside Reinhardt at that moment, an entity with an unknown identity but possessing immense magical power.

Harriet blankly watched as someone walked out from the central palace of Tetra.

Saviolin Turner.

Harriet saw Shanafel's pale-faced commander exiting Tetra, staggering, and then collapsing on the spot.

“Commander!”

“Commander!”

Numerous knights rushed to the Shanafel commander, who had collapsed with her legs giving out.

It couldn't be helped.

It was an event that brought immense doubt, suspicion, and shock to everyone's hearts.

—---

I was gagged.

My mouth was covered to prevent any mischief using the Word Magic.

But because of that, I couldn't make any excuses or say anything in my defense.

Why I had done what I had done so far.

What the reasons for my actions were.

I wasn't given even the slightest opportunity for defense or argument.

I had done all this to prevent a potentially world-ending Gate incident, and now that I had found Akasha, I had achieved my goal.

I wasn't given the chance to say any of that.

That I possessed the power of Word Magic.

The greatest superpower had now become the worst curse for me.

It was as if the Word Magic had been given to me just to make me unable to say anything in this situation.

I couldn't say anything for myself or for those who felt betrayed by me.

Trapped in the dark underground, I couldn't sense time, but I knew when day broke.

Loyar returned in human form.

Loyar was locked up in the iron bars opposite me.

With the gag in his mouth, Loyar looked at me.

"Ugh… W-… Wh… Why…?"

Tears streamed down Loyar's bulging eyes.

Did she think it was her fault that I was caught?

I don't know.

I don't think so.

The accumulation of incidents was bound to reach a critical point and explode, and it just so happened at this unfortunate timing.

I didn't know what I had to face, but once it had come to this, I just accepted it. It was bound to happen, so it happened.

It felt like giving up.

So, although I couldn't speak, I shook my head at Loyar, who stared at me with wide eyes and cried. I had the freedom to move my head, at least.

Was it your fault?

I don't think so.

Did my feelings get through?

Loyar didn't stop crying but sobbed even louder with a more animal-like sound.

Where was this place in the temple?

I didn't know.

The Empire seemed to think it was better to keep me locked up in the temple rather than transporting me to the palace now that I had been captured in the temple.

-Squeak, squeak

Soon, the guards were replaced.

They must have been knights from Shanafel and mages from the Royal Magic Corps.

Just yesterday, they had been on a mission with me, and now they were here to monitor me, accused of being the Demon King.

In just a day, it was as if the world had turned upside down, and everything had changed.

Two sets of iron bars.

Soon, I found out who was watching me and Loyar from the closest distance.

Saviolin Turner.

She stared down at me, bound and slumped within the iron bars.

She seemed unable to comprehend the situation yet.

"Reinhardt."

"…"

She called my name from beyond the iron bars.

"Are you the Demon King?"

I was gagged, so I couldn't say anything.

Perhaps it was better this way.

Yes, I am the Demon King.

Or deny it, even in this situation.

I didn't want to say anything with my own mouth.

Saviolin Turner stared at me with wide eyes from beyond the iron bars.

"Could it be… Even saving the princess…"

"…"

That's right.

It couldn't be helped that she would come to such a conclusion.

In the chain of events, even my act of saving Charlotte…

It must have seemed like an action to maintain the existence of the soul of the previous Demon King.

All the actions I took to protect someone under the pretense of saving everyone eventually turned into arrows aimed at me.

Although I could understand that thought process intellectually.

There was nothing I could do about the despair and misery that engulfed me.

Of course, I wasn't just confined and monitored.

"The dispel isn't working."

"Indeed, otherwise, it should have been lifted the moment he crossed the Temple Gate."

He must have deduced that I was transforming. Saviolin Turner, having heard the mage's report, stared at me intently.

"Did you use some sort of polymorph magic…?"

The ring of Sarkegaar, specialized in disguise, remained undetected even by the mages' magic.

Saviolin Turner continued to watch me, as if wanting to believe that I was merely human.

However, she knew that my guardian was the unmistakable Lycansloth, the Demon Lord's minion.

And with two relics in my possession, I couldn't be treated as merely a servant of the Demon Lord.

If not at the level of the Demon Lord, the perception that one couldn't possess two relics must have existed.

How much time had passed?

Did the Council and the Black Order know about my current state?

What would happen if they found out?

In a state where I couldn't sense time properly, I soon faced the inevitable.

"Your Highness…"

I heard Saviolin Turner speak to someone with a worried voice.

Soon, someone's silhouette appeared in front of the iron bars.

It was Charlotte.

She stared at me intently.

"Open it."

"Your Highness, I can't."

"Open it."

Charlotte said it only twice. Unable to resist her strong will, Saviolin Turner opened the iron gate with a grimace.

Charlotte, still bound, kneeled down in front of me, who was also sitting hesitantly.

She looked at me.

I couldn't gauge the depth of the swirling emotions or the depth of the betrayal in her eyes.

Charlotte asked me as she stared.

"You've lied to me so much up until now."

"…"

"So at least this time, just this once… Be honest. Just once. Just this once… Tell me the truth."

Charlotte looked at me.

Even in this situation, she kneeled before me, begging for the truth.

"Is it… true?"

She didn't ask what was true, but I knew what she meant.

Was it true that I was the child who escaped the Demon Lord's castle with her?

Was I the Demon Lord?

That's what she was asking.

Should I deny it?

Should I continue to lie even now when everything has come to light?

There's no way to escape, and the truth that I am the Demon Lord is bound to be revealed.

There's no way to return to how things were before, without suspicion.

I have deceived Charlotte up until now.

I have lied to her more than anyone else.

And now that everything has ended, should I continue with another threadbare lie?

No.

I'm tired now.

I'm worn out from piling up lies.

I looked at Charlotte.

If I lied even now, an even greater sense of betrayal would return.

Denying it here and now, it seemed like something irreversible would happen.

It was too late.

I couldn't keep piling up misunderstandings.

I nodded, my mouth still gagged.

"I… Why… What did I do wrong to you?"

There was nothing like that.

"Why me? Why only me? Why did you have to torment me like this? Did you hate me

that much? I understand that the Empire destroyed the Demon Realm and you wanted revenge… But why… Why did I have to go through all this? You know how much I've thought about you and cared for you. But was it all just part of your plan for me to forget you and rely on you again?"

I wanted to save you.

"Using the soul of the Demon King within me, what did you want to do? Yes, it was strange. Somehow. I felt like something was going on, so I asked to be taken to the palace of spring, you appeared just in time to prevent my rampage, and all of that… It was possible because you were the son of the Demon King, right? From the beginning, you knew everything that was happening to me…"

I couldn't say a word about the puzzle I was trying to piece together alone.

If my lips were unsealed, could I have said something?

Did I have anything to say to the question of why I hadn't spoken sooner?

If I suddenly can speak, they would probably think I'm telling another lie since I've already been exposed.

"Did you plan on marrying me… If we had gotten married… would you have thought you could swallow the empire…?"

Yes.

I could have thought that far.

The engagement to protect you back then could be seen as a conspiracy of the Demon King trying to swallow the empire through marriage with the eliminated princess of the imperial competition.

It was Bertus who proposed the engagement with the princess, but I accepted it.

A Demon King who swallows the empire, not rebuilding the demon world, but making the enemy his own.

It seemed like a plausible plan, even in my own thoughts.

Of course, there was no such intention at all.

So, by becoming the guardian knight of the princess and preventing that situation, Ellen would become the hero of the empire?

"Did I… do so much… so much… wrong to you?"

She had been used by me from beginning to end.

From the escape of the Demon King's castle, meeting her at the temple, becoming friends with her, taking on the role of a messenger, and countless lies built up while dealing with Charlotte. All of this could only be understood as part of my ambition to swallow the empire.

So, Charlotte stood before me, trembling with the tremors of betrayal, unable to cry properly.

"You should have killed me… You should have just killed me…"

"…"

"If you were going to make me more miserable than death… You should have just killed me…"

The person who saved her was, in fact, the Demon King.

And now, knowing that it was the Demon King, she had come to rely on someone else, who was also the Demon King.

She couldn't help but think she had been deceived all along.

"Did you enjoy it… playing with me like that… when I smiled at you, unknowingly… crying in front of you… all those moments… were they fun…?"

Charlotte looked at me.

Her empty gaze stared at me.

"Did you find it unbearable to laugh at all those moments when I tried to rely on you, not knowing that I was being used and not knowing that my enemy was right in

front of me?"

No.

Right now, I find my own situation more ridiculous than anything.

I have brought about all of this, stirring up what should have been left alone, and now the catastrophe of everything is right before my eyes.

My current state is ridiculous.

"I wish you… in the world… would die in the most miserable way possible…"

Charlotte muttered blankly.

"I wish you couldn't find peace even in death, and were stuck in a place like the bottom of hell, suffering eternally… I wish that would happen…"

Charlotte cursed me.

What did I do so wrong?

Charlotte kept saying that in front of me.

That was what I wanted to say.

What did I do so wrong…?

Chapter 436

Supported by the knights, Charlotte hobbled her way back to the surface, where two people awaited her.

Ellen and Harriet were waiting.

A temporary prison-like space had been set up inside the temple to hold the students who had caused the incident.

In the vicinity, the highest-ranking mages from the Shanafel and the Royal Magic Division were on high alert.

To put it simply, the security was so tight that not even an ant could enter.

The temporary detention facility where Reinhardt was being held had even stricter security than the Central Palace Tetra, where the Emperor resided.

Harriet still couldn't believe the situation unfolding before her, while Ellen maintained a calm expression.

However, she didn't say a word, hiding her true emotions.

When Charlotte said they could go in together, Ellen shook her head.

She refused, saying she didn't know what to say to Reinhardt.

Charlotte spoke with lifeless eyes.

"Reinhardt is… the Demon King."

"Lies… No. It can't be. Why would Reinhardt…?"

Harriet's lips trembled, shaking her head vigorously.

Charlotte didn't say anything to Harriet, who was denying reality.

Ellen supported Charlotte as they walked.

Ellen didn't say a word until the end.

Unable to turn away, Harriet stared at the detention facility where Reinhardt was being held.

Reinhardt had admitted to being the Demon King himself.

Why?

What did it mean when he said he wanted to protect everyone?

Harriet stood there as if nailed to the spot, staring at the temporary detention building with its tight security for a long time.

"No… no, Reinhardt… no…"

Harriet mumbled as if she were in a trance.

There were many things she wanted to ask Reinhardt.

What were all the things he had done so far?

What did he want, after all?

But Harriet wasn't even allowed to meet Reinhardt on her own.

—---

"…"

"…"

Emperor Nelliod de Gardias and Crown Prince Bertus de Gardias sat facing each other, not saying a word.

Reinhardt.

The one they thought was the hope of the empire turned out to be the Demon King.

All this time, the actions he took to save Charlotte were in fact part of the Demon King's plan to devour the empire.

"We underestimated Darkland and the new Demon King too much."

"…"

The Emperor remained silent at Bertus's words.

"I almost sold the empire to the Demon King."

Even when it came to the engagement, it was Bertus who proposed it, not Reinhardt.

Was this what it felt like to have your insides churn?

Unknowingly, he almost handed the empire over to the Demon King on a silver platter.

The hero who saved Charlotte de Gardias several times.

That's why they agreed to the engagement with the First Princess, thinking that it would guarantee her safety.

But it was all part of the Demon King's plan.

Disguised as a hero, he accumulated numerous achievements to outshine Bertus de Gardias, the influential heir to the throne, and become Emperor.

No, there could have been a way to make Charlotte the Empress.

Instead of rebuilding the collapsed demon realm, he would devour an existing empire.

The Emperor and First Prince couldn't help but be both amazed and horrified by the Demon King's unthinkable plan, which almost came to fruition.

"With the power of the demon realm in his hands, he could have easily created fake achievements, even claiming to have defeated the Demon King himself. Then… that flimsy plan might have come true."

"…"

Everything had been meticulously calculated.

The soul of the Demon King was implanted in Charlotte. The rescue, timed to coincide with the erosion, and the belief instilled in the royal family that no one but Reinhardt could calm Charlotte's condition.

A kind of revenge that didn't destroy the enemy, but made them his own.

Clearly, Reinhardt had the power to realize that plan.

Both Bertus and the Emperor felt the cold steel of a blade pressed against their necks.

Not only Bertus, but Reinhardt also had seen the emperor alone several times because of the importance of his presence.

There were always options to kill the Emperor and cause chaos in the empire.

However, he had endured all and withstood the moments of small revenge for a bolder goal.

What a transcendent patience, mental strength, and strong-willed being he was.

Unaware of the truth, the two believed that Reinhardt's actions had been carried out under the guise of revenge.

That's why, after they knew that the Demon King had infiltrated the temple, they felt terror at his propulsion, becoming the Princess's closest confidant and even her fiancé in just over a year.

They had thought him a petty force they could eliminate at any time, but the Demon King was not plotting from afar, but right by their side.

Swallowing the empire, not destroying it, while nurturing his ambitions.

“And considering those who were close to Reinhardt, like Ellen Artorius, Olivia Lanze, and Harriet de Saint-Owan… it might have been possible for him to push me out as well.”

The hero's younger sister.

The Saint of the Five Great Divine Religions.

And Harriet de Saint-Owan had used a great magic to block the falling meteor, surpassing even the most powerful archmage.

Considering what the three of them could do and their influence, it was a catastrophe for the empire itself that they had become the Demon King's people.

Of course, it was true that Ellen Artorius played a crucial role in revealing the Demon King's identity.

If Ellen and Charlotte hadn't properly uncovered the traces of the Demon King, it would have been entirely possible for the disguised Demon King to swallow the empire.

Both Bertus and the Emperor were mentally distraught.

Because an unimaginable event had occurred.

“What to do about the disposal is worrisome.”

And the most important problem remained.

They had caught the Demon King.

But this was both the end of one matter and the beginning of a tremendous dilemma.

The most important first question.

Would they reveal to the world that Reinhardt was, in fact, the Demon King?

“Even if we set aside the reason why the Demon King could receive the choice of two sacred artifacts, it could still cause a schism in the Divine Church.”

“Yes, indeed…”

The gods are right.

If Als and Tu’an chose the Demon King, then the conclusion could be drawn that the Demon King was a just being.

“While we could claim that the Demon King used wicked means to steal the sacred artifacts, the masses might believe that story, but ultimately, there would be great chaos within the Als and Tu’an sects.”

“The problem is not only the followers of the Demon King, but also the possibility of some within the Divine Church becoming demon worshipers.”

Bertus and the Emperor's faces were filled with gloom.

Some in the Divine Church might follow the Demon King. If that happened, it was only natural that it would cause great chaos across the continent, though not all of the followers would necessarily convert.

“We could publicly execute the Demon King and announce that there are no more Archdemons left in the world to stabilize the public sentiment… but that seems too risky.”

"Indeed. We've captured the Demon King, but we still haven't captured the remnants. And since the Demon King was able to infiltrate the temple, we don't know to what extent his influence has spread…”

There were two pressing issues.

The extent of the Demon King's influence remained uncertain.

A public execution would inevitably provoke a rescue operation by the remnants. With the presence of the Archdemon being absolute, any demon loyal to the Demon Realm would risk their life for the mission to save the Demon King.

And thirdly,

The Demon King's plan wasn't solely to engulf the empire.

"It's almost certain that the series of events that unfolded in the Lich's Tomb are related to the Demon King's influence."

"Is that so?"

"Grand Duke Saint Owan, who was involved in the last incident, accompanied Roswin on an expedition to the Lich's Tomb."

The emperor had read the compiled reports from Saviolin Turner and Grand Duke Saint Owan.

"We don't know for certain yet, but it's believed that the conflict was over a magical artifact called 'Akasha.' Both Roswin and the tomb's master mentioned it."

"Akasha…?"

"We can't be sure. From what we've observed, many high-ranking vampires and magicians were present, and it's believed that Roswin knows Akasha's whereabouts. However, one of the Demon King's factions betrayed him and seemed to attempt to seize Akasha… I don't know if the Demon King failed or succeeded in securing it."

"What is Akasha?"

"I don't know."

The emperor added with a shake of his head.

"But according to Turner's report, it's an object that can make one a god.'"

As absurd as it sounded, the struggle for possession of this object had caused great turmoil.

A phenomenon where the moon appeared dozens of times larger, and colossal magic that seemed to belong to a mythological era.

If such entities would risk their lives for this object, the claim must be true.

"Whatever Akasha is, we can't kill the Demon King carelessly at this point. Whether it's in the hands of the Demon King or his underlings, it would be a problem."

Just as the Senior Valier had foreseen.

None can bear to have a weapon capable of destroying them in the hands of their enemy.

As Luna Artorius had said,

It wasn't because of greed for Akasha, but because of fear.

The empire, now knowing of Akasha, could not help but desire it.

—---

In the end, the Demon King must die someday, but he was not an entity that could be killed immediately.

Bertus headed to the prison where Reinhardt was incarcerated in the Temple.

Reinhardt was the Demon King.

This fact had cast doubt on things that had never been questioned before and gave birth to numerous suspicions.

However, some questions had been resolved.

It was utterly meaningless in understanding the situation, but he now completely understood one thing that had been incomprehensible.

Cross-dressing.

Reinhardt had never been quiet in the first place.

However, it was astonishing that the Demon King had gone as far as to cross-dress while infiltrating the temple, where even being quiet wasn't enough.

Bertus arrived at a simple conclusion from this inexplicable behavior.

Could it be that the Demon King was originally a woman?

In other words, she was not the prince of Darkland, but the princess.

It was evident that the Demon King possessed the ability to change and disguise her body.

Therefore, she used Charlotte, who possessed the soul of the Demon King, and

initially assumed the appearance of a man to win her heart.

It was unclear whether the Demon King had enrolled in the temple to make use of Charlotte de Gardias, but she must have judged that assuming a male appearance would be more advantageous than a female one.

That's why she took on Reinhardt's appearance and moved around.

But having been in a male form for so long, she must have felt stifled and desired to return to her original appearance.

Perhaps she expressed this inner desire through the bizarre method of participating in a cross-dressing competition.

Without such a thought, Bertus could not fathom why the Demon King would need to participate in a cross-dressing contest.

'Come to think of it, she got along better with the female students… Was that why?'

Although the relationship between demons and humans was ultimately sinister, it wasn't incomprehensible that she would prefer to mingle with the female students if she felt more comfortable with them.

With all these thoughts in mind, Bertus was finally able to draw a conclusion about the Demon King's irritating cross-dressing, which had brought him nothing but trouble.

The Demon King was a princess.

With that, everything was explained.

She had been plotting to plunder the empire using the princess on the surface, but deep down, she didn't want to forget her true self, so she did such things.

It seemed…

"…"

Bertus stopped thinking.

Chapter 437

The chains that bound the Demon King were no ordinary chains.

These chains, designed to restrain powerful criminals or magic beasts, blocked all magic attempts made by the captive.

Casting spells.

Magic Body Strengthening.

Or using artifacts.

Hence, the Demon King could not use any type of power except for physical strength or uncontrollable Supernatural abilities.

And of course, the numerous knights and wizards stationed within the prison would not idly watch the Demon King's escape.

In case of an emergency, using Supernatural tricks.

To prepare for that situation and listen to the testimonies, Bertus was doing what he had to do.

-Crackling! Sizzling!

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Uuuugh!"

Bertus watched as Reinhardt writhed in pain alongside Saviolin Turner.

Already for about three hours.

With bloodshot eyes, Reinhardt endured the magic without passing out, his entire body trembling.

-Clank! Clank!

-Uuuh! Ugh! Ugh!

Behind him, a white-haired woman with disheveled hair was also writhing.

Although she was not subjected to any magic, she wept as if Reinhardt's pain was her own.

Reinhardt writhed in agony, and the white-haired woman felt his pain as her own, crying like a beast.

How much time had passed?

Bertus watched as Reinhardt's pain ended and his body relaxed.

The archmage of the Royal Magic Corps, who had cast numerous spells up to now, lowered his head.

It was a pointless torture so far.

"None of the mental magic is working."

“…Is that so?"

"It feels like a massive barrier… as if protected by a divine force… Ah, I misspoke. I apologize, Your Highness."

"He is said to be chosen by a god. It's not a lie."

Now that they knew the Demon King had the power of Word Magic, they couldn't haphazardly remove his gag. They wanted to completely break his mind and brainwash him to get information, but the Demon King's mind was sturdy.

As if protected by a colossal force, there was no way to invade or even find a small gap in the Demon King's mind.

"Then ask the one over there."

Bertus pointed to the opposite iron bars.

Following his order, the door to the cell across the iron bars was opened, and Turner

personally removed the gag from Loyar's mouth.

Turner found it painful to see the traces of her desperate crying.

"What is Akasha?"

“…I don't know."

"Too obvious an answer."

“…I don't know. I don't."

Loyar had hidden away during the Full Moon Night. As such, she hadn't gone to the Tomb of the Lich and knew even less about Akasha than the Empire did.

"Let's test whether her mind is as sturdy. Begin."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The mental magic inflicted upon Reinhardt now began to affect Loyar.

-Crackling! Sizzling!

"Kkkuuuuh… Uuuuuugh!"

Loyar's supernatural strength had long surpassed the level of ordinary criminals.

But the one touching her mind now wasn't a common torturer or heretic inquisitor found anywhere.

It was an archmage who had specialized in mental magic, among the best of the best human magicians.

A venerable archmage who would have no reason to deal with such vulgar tasks as directly torturing someone's mind. In other words, an existence so proficient in mental magic that they had no reason to engage in such matters for the sake of insignificant clinical data.

Loyar's mind could not be safe from that touch.

"Ugh, ugh… ugh…"

Her mind completely shattered, drooling saliva from the corner of her mouth, the white-haired woman stood devoid of any presence, as Bertus inquired.

"What is Akasha?"

"An artifact… that collects… infinite… magic…"

Finally, Loyar spits out the truth she knows.

"Collecting magic? I heard it can grant you power like that of a god?"

"I don't know… I… don't know more than that…"

Another keyword: collecting magic.

In her broken state, it was unlikely she would lie.

This woman clearly knew nothing about Akasha.

In the end, Bertus had to remove Reinhardt's gag and make him speak.

Bertus looked past the broken white-haired woman and towards the back.

"…"

While Loyar was subjected to mental torture, Reinhardt had not uttered a word.

But Bertus couldn't help but be surprised when he saw Reinhardt.

Like Loyar, who had wept at the sight of her lord's agony, Reinhardt was also crying with the gag clenched in his teeth.

His tears were red.

Pain, anger, sorrow, and despair beyond what ordinary tears could express.

And that despair flowed down the Demon King's cheeks.

Seeing Reinhardt's tears of blood, Bertus felt an intense, unknown fear.

The white-haired woman does not know what Akasha is.

In that case, they must ask Reinhardt.

Bertus stood in front of Reinhardt again, leaving the unconscious white-haired woman behind.

He stared intently at the traces of tears of blood running from the Demon King's eyes to his cheeks.

What is Akasha?

A simple question, but the unknown power of the Word Magic was a significant obstacle.

"He'll starve to death before we find anything out at this rate."

With the gag in place to block the use of the Word Magic, they couldn't provide him with water or food.

They couldn't kill the Demon King before finding out what Akasha was.

But at this rate, the Demon King would die of dehydration or starvation before they could learn anything. Yet, they couldn't simply let him speak, as he might try something with his Word Magic.

Word Magic is a supernatural power.

Thus, magic could not counteract or block them.

Word Magic.

Supernatural powers.

A countermeasure.

"…"

In Bertus' mind, the name of the person most needed in this situation surfaced.

An immunity bearer.

Scarlett would not be affected by Reinhardt's Word Magic.

Then, whatever happens, Scarlett could intervene.

Royal Class, 2nd-year B-3, Scarlett had been feeling that the atmosphere at the temple was uneasy lately.

Of course, she hadn't sensed any specific incident. The battle in the Darkland and stories about the capture of the Demon King were being kept top secret, so it wasn't a situation where rumors could spread.

However, the sight of many more imperial knights and mages than usual roaming the temple and the extremely gloomy atmosphere were enough to make her feel that something ominous was lurking.

And above all, the atmosphere in the Royal Class.

Charlotte had not attended classes and was not even at the temple, apparently dealing with some serious matter.

Bertus hadn't attended classes either, but she couldn't know about the A-Class.

However, without knowing the details, she could only think that the atmosphere was unusual lately.

"……Yes? What?"

So, when Bertus called Scarlett and told her the story, she couldn't help but ask.

The explanation was lengthy and verbose, but the conclusion was simple.

The Demon King was captured.

And it was Reinhardt.

Scarlett was taken aback by the unbelievable words from Bertus, with whom she had little connection.

Is he trying to play a joke on me? Why? For what reason?

However, Scarlett could not find a hint of jest in Bertus's expression.

Bertus always had a subtle smile on his face, and though his true intentions were unclear, he was kind and gentle to all his classmates.

But now, with a serious and stern expression, it was impossible to accuse him of playing a prank.

"The important thing is that Reinhardt possesses a mysterious superpower called 'Word Magic,' which makes it difficult to conduct proper interrogations. That's why your help is needed."

"Ah…"

Scarlett couldn't understand what Bertus was talking about.

However, she could at least grasp that her immunity, a mysterious superpower similar to the Word Spirit, was needed in this situation.

Reinhardt is the Demon King.

He needs her help.

Not understanding what he meant, Scarlett nervously nodded her head.

"Yes… If there's something I need to do… I'll do it…"

Although Bertus didn't explicitly say it, Scarlett understood that she shouldn't tell anyone about this.

Bertus didn't tell Scarlett more than was necessary.

Reinhardt is the Demon King.

He uses a peculiar superpower called Word Spirit, so if he tries to deceive her with it during the interrogation, she must kill him.

It was a simple and intuitive order.

Scarlett arrived at a building within the heavily guarded temple.

Many knights and mages were stationed around, and it was impossible to casually enter the vicinity of the building, as a wide area was off-limits.

Reinhardt is the Demon King.

While receiving the favor of Alsbringer, Scarlett admired Reinhardt, even feeling a sense of awe towards him. But she couldn't believe that he was the Demon King.

As Bertus led her into the heavily guarded underground of the building, Scarlett felt as if she was floating.

What was happening?

Was it alright for her to be involved in this?

What was happening to the world?

Biting her lip to stave off the fear, Scarlett soon arrived at the dungeon deep underground.

Scarlett didn't know if the temple originally had a dungeon or if it was a hastily constructed building.

The underground space wasn't very large.

However, all the knights and mages present were silently guarding their posts, including the squad leader, Saviolin Turner of the Shanafel.

Each of them, who could be called one of the strongest humans, seemed determined not to allow any intruders.

Yet they all remained silent.

In that suffocating atmosphere, Bertus handed Scarlett some prepared water and food.

He couldn't just let him starve, so he needed to be fed.

Scarlett took it, trembling.

Reinhardt was here.

Reinhardt, who had been revealed to be the Demon King.

With a container of water and bread in hand, Scarlett slowly walked down the dimly lit corridor with Bertus.

In the middle of the dark corridor.

There were iron-barred cells and dungeons on both sides.

Scarlett could see two beings bound by chains that were undoubtedly magically reinforced.

A woman with disheveled white hair, slumped and weakened.

And Reinhardt.

They couldn't be considered close.

Despite his rough demeanor, she had always admired the way he never yielded to pressure and persevered with his will.

She had always admired that figure.

However, that being now lay in a pitiful state, shackled and awaiting judgment in the underground of the temple.

"Are you the Demon King?"

"Why?"

"How come?"

With a feeling akin to facing a bizarre tragedy, Scarlett watched as Saviolin Turner, her face stern, unlocked the iron bars.

The miserable Reinhardt did not say a word as he looked at Scarlett.

As if he knew she was coming.

What could the bloodstains on his cheek mean?

Had he been severely tortured?

"…"

Scarlett's fingertips trembled as she removed his gag.

Unable to understand how the Demon King who troubled the world and the pitiful, wretched figure of Reinhardt before her could be the same being, Scarlett was at a loss.

-Thud

The gag that had been in Reinhardt's mouth fell to the ground, lifeless.

Bertus asked,

"What is Akasha?"

At Bertus's question, Reinhardt opened his mouth as if he had been waiting.

"Akasha is… a tool of creation."

"Originally belonging to Cantus Magna, at some point Darkland came into possession of it."

"In the past, the Demon King Valier used Akasha to create a new world and planned to migrate there with the demons."

"Akasha exists in the labyrinth beneath the Demon King's castle."

"But now it must have been moved. You won't be able to find it, and I don't even know where Akasha is anymore."

"I lost all memories of living in the demon realm."

"So, I didn't know I had Akasha until now."

"You must be curious what I want?"

"I wanted… peace… peace… hahaha… hahaha…"

"I wished for… a peaceful world… ha, haha… really…"

"I… don't hate humans…"

"I wanted to… save all of you… truly…"

"It may be hard to believe… but please trust me…"

"Please… help…"

Reinhardt spoke with a faint, hollow smile.

Saying everything.

Yet, as if he knew that no one would believe him.

Unable to stop the emerging laughter.

Spilling out the truth about everything.

"If you won't believe me… you must release me quickly."

Reinhardt lifted his head with difficulty.

"Otherwise, Akasha may be used to destroy the world."

The Demon King, his eyes bloodshot, looked at Bertus.

"If you won't even do that, at least give me a public execution."

Like a madman.

"Before the situation gets worse."

Scarlett could only stare blankly at the Demon King, submerged in sorrow, letting out a low laugh.

"Ha, haha… hahaha… hahahaha…"

Reinhardt neither drank water nor ate bread.

Bertus furrowed his brow as he looked at Reinhardt.

"Nonsense."

Bertus said so, looking down at Reinhardt, who had lowered his head after speaking.

"If you already had Akasha, why didn't you use it? Then what was the incident at Lich's tomb all about?"

"…"

"You lost your memory? So you didn't know? What kind of convenient lie is that? Are you trying to make a fool of me, Reinhardt?"

"…"

"Now that things have come to this, has that well-functioning brain of yours stopped working? Now you're resorting to lies that don't even fit… not worth worrying about…"

"…"

"Let's say Akasha is indeed the tool of creation. And let's say your father, whom you don't even want to believe, tried to use Akasha to lead the demons and migrate to the demon world. And you, for the sake of peace. Huh? Let's say that was the case. Then, what have you done to Charlotte… my sister. My sister, what was that all about? What is it?"

Crack!

"Ugh!"

"You've done too many things that I can't accept for someone who claims to have wanted peace. Don't you think so?"

Reinhardt, who had been kicked in the solar plexus, gasped for breath.

Bertus's words were not logically incorrect.

Why hadn't he used the Akasha, which he already possessed? Was there another truth to what had happened at the Lich's tomb?

If the library under the Demon King's castle was the Akasha, why had he left it alone until now?

And what had been the purpose of deceiving Charlotte all this time? Wasn't it an act to swallow up the empire? But in reality, he wanted peace?

He claimed to have lost his memory.

And therefore, he knew nothing.

It could only be a lie, not even worth laughing at.

Now, claiming that Akasha was actually in his hands, and that he should be released before it was used for destruction, was nothing more than a desperate excuse.

"And, you know about the power cartridges and Moonshine that you ordered to be made in the Magic Research Department, right?"

"Ah… right, there was that too…"

Upon hearing those words, Reinhardt seemed to remember and smiled.

"I investigated the things you've done in the temple, thinking they were all tricks, but they were already made, weren't they? And you tried to hide the results while using the excuse of the existence of the Demon King."

"Yeah… that's right…"

Haha.

And.

Scarlett, terrified, looked at Reinhardt, who was laughing frivolously.

"You must be using them somewhere to grow your army, right? Aren't you?"

"No… not at all… that's not it…"

"Really? Then what excuse do you have for that matter?"

With a cold expression, Bertus grabbed Reinhardt's hair and forcibly lifted his head to meet his eyes.

"I wish you'd think a little more before lying this time."

The dead-eyed Demon King met the Emperor's furious gaze.

"I… actually… know the future?"

"…"

With his pale, dried, cracked lips trembling.

Reinhardt spoke amidst a mix of despair, self-mockery, and sorrowful laughter.

"In the future… that is… the moment the first semester starts next year… a disaster called the Gate Incident is scheduled to happen… and then… about half of humanity, no, even more… will die…?"

"I… tried to prevent that incident…"

"But I don't know why it happens… why… even I don't know… but I do know that it will happen…"

"Even if I suddenly say something like that… who would believe it… so I searched for a reason on my own… a dimensional gate connecting to another world… maybe someone who knows such magic is the cause… or maybe I can do something if I go to the other world first… so I've been doing various things… that's why I had Harriet

research dimensional magic… that's why…”

"The power cartridges and Moonshine were… because if I couldn't solve it… I'd have to fight… I wanted to create the things that they'll make in the future… to increase our strength in advance… that was the idea…”

"But once they were created, it seemed like Cantus Magna would target them… at that time, I assumed that Cantus Magna had the Akasha… Cantus Magna… so the Gold Hunters are a group that moves with magic as their objective…”

Slap!

Finally unable to bear listening any longer, Bertus slapped Reinhardt's cheek.

"Instead of lying, you're writing a novel now, huh? Claiming to know the future?"

"Heh, hehe… hehehehehehe how, how did… how did you know?"

Reinhardt let out a wail that was almost a laugh, staring wide-eyed at Bertus.

"This is all a novel. In fact… this world. A novel I wrote. Why do I know the future? Because I created… created this world… I am… like the creator… He… hehe… hehehe… But… I don't know everything, only a tiny bit… like a pathetic… creator… That's me… he… hehehe…”

"You damned bastard…!"

Bertus's eyes rolled back in anger, as he roughly yanked the sword that Scarlett had been carrying.

Shring!

"Your Majesty!"

"Yo… Your Highness!"

"Let go! How much further will this… this madman…!"

As Bertus was about to swing the sword, Turner desperately held him back, and Scarlett's face went pale.

"Let go! Let me go! Is this bastard still playing games?!"

"Your Majesty! You can't! Not yet, it's not the right time!"

Despite seeing Bertus lose his rationality in rage, Reinhardt continued to laugh like a madman.

"It's the truth… What can you do… about the truth… What can you do… he, hehe… hehe…"

The Devil King laughed like a madman.

"So… you can't believe or accept what I said… so… so…"

The expression on the Devil King's face, who had been laughing like a madman, vanished.

"Kill me before it's too late."

Filled with terror, Scarlett could only watch the scene unfold.

Chapter 438

The council chamber was filled with a gloomy silence, and no one dared to speak.

Present at the council were the five leaders of the House of Vampire Lords, including Antirianus, as well as Sarkegaar.

Eleris had vouched for Antirianus, who had returned after betraying them.

Antirianus was not a traitor; instead, he had killed the leader of Cantus Magna and returned.

Regarding Akasha's whereabouts, Eleris only provided minimal explanation.

Akasha was a tool of creation and was now being kept in a safe place.

Under Valier's instructions, Eleris had temporarily moved Akasha to another location.

They were currently gathered at the base of Luvien (Previously Luruien,) not the fortress of Epiax.

Epiax was no longer usable, as many humans had been dispatched there for investigation.

Everyone had some idea of what had happened through the traces of Epiax's collapse.

Lydia Schmitt had fought with someone and disappeared.

Now, they knew the situation, as Epinhauser had informed them through Lucinil that the Demon King and Loyar were being detained in the temple.

Lydia Schmitt was presumed dead.

The Demon King and Loyar were being held captive in the temple.

Eleris looked pale.

"Your misguided mercy has endangered His Majesty, Eleris."

"…"

At Sarkegaar's sharp words, Eleris could not respond.

Misguided mercy.

It was that small cogwheel that had failed to mesh, exposing Valier's identity.

Even with Sarkegaar's shapeshifting ability, it was impossible to break in and escape.

Hence, a direct confrontation was the only option.

"It is certain that the place where His Majesty is being held is more difficult to enter than the Emperor’s central palace of Tetra. And to attack that place, we must first penetrate the temple with our limited forces. Can we now break through the temple and forcibly enter the prison where His Majesty is held in its depths?"

No one answered Sarkegaar's question.

This was not a skirmish; it was a full-scale invasion of the enemy's stronghold.

It was an impossible task.

Apart from the Council's leaders, they had other allies.

"Is there any possibility that the Black Order will help us in this matter?"

At Sarkegaar's question, Gallarush shook his head.

"The condition of our cooperation with the Order was to eliminate Cantus Magna. And since Cantus Magna has already disappeared, there's no reason for them to lend us more strength."

"We should rather worry about them coveting Akasha."

The Black Order was not present at this meeting.

As they could not predict how the Order would react if they learned the truth about Akasha, the Council had been restraining their contact with them since the incident at the Tomb of Lich.

In fact, it was overly generous for Epinhauser to inform them of Valier's detention.

Since the issue with Cantus Magna was resolved and they had not shared the truth about Akasha, their alliance could be considered over. Strictly speaking, it was a betrayal by the Council.

So, asking the Order for help to rescue the kidnapped Demon King would be futile, and the Order was more likely to demand Akasha instead.

There was no hope of receiving help from the Black Order.

The only power available to them was the Vampire Council.

Rescuing Valier was impossible.

Eleris, who bore the greatest responsibility for this situation, remained in a daze with a stern expression.

Valier was going to die soon.

Antirianus, who had been silent, smiled coldly.

"What if we use the Akasha?"

"…"

At those words, Sarkegaar narrowed his brow.

"Wasn't the Akasha said to be a tool of creation? How could that help us in this situation?"

"That's an overly simplified explanation."

Antirianus looked at Eleris with a subtle smile.

"The Akasha itself is already an incredibly powerful source of energy. The Imperial

Court and the Temple must have defenses in place against such powerful magic, so it would be difficult to resolve the situation using powerful spells. However… what if we think about it as a tool of creation?"

"…"

"Use it in a slightly different way."

"Different way? What do you mean?"

"Let's say, creating only half a world, and doing it rather clumsily."

Antirianus grinned.

"Creating only half a world…?"

"Because the Akasha is in an incomplete state, if we use it now… it would create something infinitely close to a world, but not yet a world."

Eleris bit her lip at Antirianus's explanation.

Antirianus hadn't seen the Akasha himself, but he had heard about it from Cantus Magna's leader, Lukren.

As a tool of creation, he had no choice but to know how it could be used.

He had already heard about the effects of using the Akasha in its incomplete state, and the side effects that would occur.

"We'll make that world collide with our current world."

"A very big."

"Something no one has ever seen or heard of before."

"A terrifying… a truly horrible disaster would occur."

"Humanity would fall into chaos. Walls and bridges, houses would crumble and be destroyed, and humanity would face great turmoil."

"What will happen then?"

"Although it seems that the world will be destroyed, wouldn't the numerous wizards and knights who were stationed to monitor the Demon King have to leave their posts?"

"To protect people and lives, you see."

"We'll take advantage of that gap."

"We'll rescue our Demon King during that gap."

"They'll be preoccupied with dealing with the disaster that has befallen the world. They won't have time to deal with us, who are trying to rescue the Demon King from their grasp."

"Most of humanity will die or, in the worst-case scenario, humanity may be extinct due to this event, making the task of rebuilding the Demon World after rescuing him even easier, isn't that as clear as day?"

"That's why I'm suggesting."

"Using the Akasha, but deliberately using it in its incomplete state."

Antirianus looked delightedly at Eleris, who was biting her lip.

Gallarush, Luvien, and Lucinil remained silent.

Sarkegaar's eyes widened.

"Such… such a method…"

The extinction of humanity.

Rescuing the Demon King.

And reconstruction.

The method that could achieve Sarkegaar's three desires in one fell swoop was in their hands.

"It seems there's no other way. No, there's no reason to choose any other method besides this one."

Half of humanity disappears. Or they could even go extinct.

Sarkegaar thought there was no reason not to use such a method if they had it.

"Still… will it work?"

Luvien hesitated and asked.

It would be an overly massive disaster.

Even if their goal was to save Valier, could they so easily decide to cause such an event?

Lucinil looked sadly at Sarkegaar.

"I… I wish for our Valier not to die as well… but… do we have the right to do that? Can we… cause such a thing?"

As they discussed the excessively large disaster, Sarkegaar narrowed his brow in response to Lucinil's fearful and apprehensive words.

"Humans have destroyed our world."

"They have killed the children of Darkland, enslaved them, pillaged, and now they seek to crush the last hope for our future."

"They have destroyed us, plundered our lands and children, and now they aim to destroy our last hope."

"Isn't it our right, my right, to destroy them in return?"

"Who started the last war? Was it not humanity?"

"Who else has the right to destroy humanity, if not us?"

"If they have destroyed us, is it not just for them to be destroyed in equal measure?"

Since they have destroyed us, we have the right to destroy them. At these words, Lucinil bit her lip and gazed at Sarkegaar.

Neither Lucinil nor Luvien could find anything to add to that justified hatred.

Sarkegaar believed that the children of Darkland had the right to destroy humanity. Thus, he could not help but agree with Antilianus's opinion to deliberately use the incomplete Akasha.

It is the best option, with no reason not to choose it.

Even if the demon king dies, humanity would still be pushed to the brink of extinction.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

You have destroyed us, so you shall be destroyed as well.

That is not right.

That should not be done.

We must find a way to coexist.

To those who have lost everything, such talk is nothing but cheap hypocrisy uttered by those who have not experienced such a situation.

No one could say anything to the furious Sarkegaar.

"Of course, I understand your thoughts, but that doesn't mean it can be done just because you want it to be."

Antilianus spoke gently to Sarkegaar with a smile.

"The only one who knows Akasha's location now is the lord of Tuesday, and the only one who can enter Akasha is the lord of Tuesday."

The library in the underground of the demon king's castle.

Although its location has changed, only three beings can enter Akasha.

Charlotte de Gardias.

Demon King Valier.

And the ancient Archdemon, Eleris.

Eleris just stared at the table in silence.

"…"

Sarkegaar did not know that Eleris was an ancient Archdemon.

But even if he knew, it would make no difference.

A hornless Archdemon could not become the hope of the demon realm.

"Eleris."

"…"

"Take responsibility for your hideous hypocrisy."

"…"

At Sarkegaar's words, Eleris could not say anything.

Valier, who had been working to prevent the Gate incident until now, would eventually witness the Gate incident as part of a scheme to save himself.

As if by fate.

Chasing the Gate incident leads to the Gate incident occurring.

A bitter regret that nothing would have happened if nothing had been done.

Eleris pondered.

Should she run away? From the Council. From everything in the world.

Or, she could even take her own life.

But what then?

Valier, who sought to save all humans, dies at the hands of humans.

Misunderstood by everyone, he dies receiving hatred and resentment from all those he loved.

Her last descendant meets death just before achieving good deeds with good intentions.

Because of her own mistake.

As a price for indulging in clumsy compassion.

If Valier dies this way and Akasha remains hidden while Eleris alone remains silent, the world will go on without the Gate incident happening, as Valier intended.

Is that good enough?

Is that all it takes?

Due to her own hypocrisy, her last descendant dies.

If by witnessing the death of that descendant, countless beings can be saved, is that the right thing to do?

But they would say it was right, that even Valier wished for it, and that because of it, countless beings could live.

That this was justice.

Would she have to live, justifying herself like this?

"Eleris, are you going to keep spewing nonsense about how every being in the world has a reason to live, while you're intoxicated with your own hypocrisy to the very end? Sure, every being in the world has a value to live and a meaning to their existence. But, remember that the children of Darkland were also such beings."

Sarkegaar's words tormented Eleris's heart.

"Hehe… The Lord of Tuesday, who hates slaughter and avoids it so much… to have to take on such a role…"

Antirianus's laughter was like an itch in Eleris's ears.

"How… how can this be such a sad fate… Hehe, hehehehehe…"

As he listened to the insane laughter of the old vampire, who seemed to be at a loss for what to do in his enjoyment of the situation, Eleris thought back to a certain afternoon long ago.

As always, it was a lazy afternoon.

There were no customers, and lying on the counter, in a place where the dull afternoon sun shone in, she had been passing the time idly.

A certain boy entered as the shop door opened.

The boy seemed familiar, carrying a Fireball Scroll with him.

For some reason, he also had a scroll of the demons.

When Eleris realized that this boy was her last descendant.

When she learned that she had once been a tutor for a few days to the young Prince Valier Jr. of the demon world.

Eleris believed that there must be some destiny given to her.

When the boy said that he was trying to save the world and knew the future, Eleris believed that this destiny must be to save the world from destruction, and it would alleviate some of the weight of the sins and slaughter she had committed up to that point.

But.

Was it not the case?

The destiny given to her.

The last thing she should have done was not that?

The hypocrisy she built to avoid the sins and slaughter had driven her to the edge.

Trying to repay the sins committed through slaughter with hypocrisy.

In the end, committing a sin that no one in the world could forgive.

Trying to save everyone.

Killing everyone.

Was that her role?

"…"

Was that my fate?

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Rescuing the Demon King.

And reconstruction.

The method that could achieve Sarkegaar's three desires in one fell swoop was in their hands.

"It seems there's no other way. No, there's no reason to choose any other method besides this one."

Half of humanity disappears. Or they could even go extinct.

Sarkegaar thought there was no reason not to use such a method if they had it.

"Still… will it work?"

Luvien hesitated and asked.

It would be an overly massive disaster.

Even if their goal was to save Valier, could they so easily decide to cause such an event?

Lucinil looked sadly at Sarkegaar.

"I… I wish for our Valier not to die as well… but… do we have the right to do that? Can we… cause such a thing?"

As they discussed the excessively large disaster, Sarkegaar narrowed his brow in response to Lucinil's fearful and apprehensive words.

"Humans have destroyed our world."

"They have killed the children of Darkland, enslaved them, pillaged, and now they seek to crush the last hope for our future."

"They have destroyed us, plundered our lands and children, and now they aim to destroy our last hope."

"Isn't it our right, my right, to destroy them in return?"

"Who started the last war? Was it not humanity?"

"Who else has the right to destroy humanity, if not us?"

"If they have destroyed us, is it not just for them to be destroyed in equal measure?"

Since they have destroyed us, we have the right to destroy them. At these words, Lucinil bit her lip and gazed at Sarkegaar.

Neither Lucinil nor Luvien could find anything to add to that justified hatred.

Sarkegaar believed that the children of Darkland had the right to destroy humanity. Thus, he could not help but agree with Antilianus's opinion to deliberately use the incomplete Akasha.

It is the best option, with no reason not to choose it.

Even if the demon king dies, humanity would still be pushed to the brink of extinction.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

You have destroyed us, so you shall be destroyed as well.

That is not right.

That should not be done.

We must find a way to coexist.

To those who have lost everything, such talk is nothing but cheap hypocrisy uttered by those who have not experienced such a situation.

No one could say anything to the furious Sarkegaar.

"Of course, I understand your thoughts, but that doesn't mean it can be done just because you want it to be."

Antilianus spoke gently to Sarkegaar with a smile.

"The only one who knows Akasha's location now is the lord of Tuesday, and the only one who can enter Akasha is the lord of Tuesday."

The library in the underground of the demon king's castle.

Although its location has changed, only three beings can enter Akasha.

Charlotte de Gardias.

Demon King Valier.

And the ancient Archdemon, Eleris.

Eleris just stared at the table in silence.

"…"

Sarkegaar did not know that Eleris was an ancient Archdemon.

But even if he knew, it would make no difference.

A hornless Archdemon could not become the hope of the demon realm.

"Eleris."

"…"

"Take responsibility for your hideous hypocrisy."

"…"

At Sarkegaar's words, Eleris could not say anything.

Valier, who had been working to prevent the Gate incident until now, would eventually witness the Gate incident as part of a scheme to save himself.

As if by fate.

Chasing the Gate incident leads to the Gate incident occurring.

A bitter regret that nothing would have happened if nothing had been done.

Eleris pondered.

Should she run away? From the Council. From everything in the world.

Or, she could even take her own life.

But what then?

Valier, who sought to save all humans, dies at the hands of humans.

Misunderstood by everyone, he dies receiving hatred and resentment from all those he loved.

Her last descendant meets death just before achieving good deeds with good intentions.

Because of her own mistake.

As a price for indulging in clumsy compassion.

If Valier dies this way and Akasha remains hidden while Eleris alone remains silent, the world will go on without the Gate incident happening, as Valier intended.

Is that good enough?

Is that all it takes?

Due to her own hypocrisy, her last descendant dies.

If by witnessing the death of that descendant, countless beings can be saved, is that the right thing to do?

But they would say it was right, that even Valier wished for it, and that because of it, countless beings could live.

That this was justice.

Would she have to live, justifying herself like this?

"Eleris, are you going to keep spewing nonsense about how every being in the world has a reason to live, while you're intoxicated with your own hypocrisy to the very end? Sure, every being in the world has a value to live and a meaning to their existence. But, remember that the children of Darkland were also such beings."

Sarkegaar's words tormented Eleris's heart.

"Hehe… The Lord of Tuesday, who hates slaughter and avoids it so much… to have to take on such a role…"

Antirianus's laughter was like an itch in Eleris's ears.

"How… how can this be such a sad fate… Hehe, hehehehehe…"

As he listened to the insane laughter of the old vampire, who seemed to be at a loss for what to do in his enjoyment of the situation, Eleris thought back to a certain afternoon long ago.

As always, it was a lazy afternoon.

There were no customers, and lying on the counter, in a place where the dull afternoon sun shone in, she had been passing the time idly.

A certain boy entered as the shop door opened.

The boy seemed familiar, carrying a Fireball Scroll with him.

For some reason, he also had a scroll of the demons.

When Eleris realized that this boy was her last descendant.

When she learned that she had once been a tutor for a few days to the young Prince Valier Jr. of the demon world.

Eleris believed that there must be some destiny given to her.

When the boy said that he was trying to save the world and knew the future, Eleris believed that this destiny must be to save the world from destruction, and it would alleviate some of the weight of the sins and slaughter she had committed up to that point.

But.

Was it not the case?

The destiny given to her.

The last thing she should have done was not that?

The hypocrisy she built to avoid the sins and slaughter had driven her to the edge.

Trying to repay the sins committed through slaughter with hypocrisy.

In the end, committing a sin that no one in the world could forgive.

Trying to save everyone.

Killing everyone.

Was that her role?

"…"

Was that my fate?

Chapter 440

After Harriet had left, Bertus sat in his office, deep in thought.

It seemed as if the Demon King would rather die.

If things continue this way, bigger problems may arise.

But why?

Wouldn't it be better to use Akasha to survive?

Why does the Demon King pretend to care about humanity?

He destroyed their world, killed their father, and if Valier Senior truly died with such a purpose, then Valier Junior must hate humanity.

The Demon King has no reason to care for human welfare.

Such forgiveness and reconciliation cannot exist in this world.

Thus, Valier's words about wanting peace must inevitably be false.

In fact, every story about Akasha could very well be a lie.

Should the Demon King be killed, or spared?

For now, the Demon King's subordinates possess Akasha, and if they attempt to use it to reclaim the Demon King, an unpredictable disaster will occur.

The Demon King's minions will use Akasha to free him.

If the Demon King is killed, will his desperate minions not use Akasha?

That is unlikely.

If the situation unfolds that way, Akasha will be used for vengeance against the dead

Demon King.

In any case, Akasha will be used.

The only way to prevent Akasha from being used is to release the Demon King.

But what if the freed Demon King uses Akasha to destroy the world?

That would be the worst possible outcome for humanity.

If the story of Akasha is true.

And if the truth is that he lost his memory and knew nothing until now.

And if it is true that he knows the future.

And if it is true that a massive disaster, a Gate catastrophe or something like it, will occur.

And if it is true that the Demon King tried to prevent that catastrophe for the sake of humanity?

Believing such a lie is too much to ask.

The Demon King has built up too many lies up to this point. That's why Bertus couldn't trust anything the Demon King said in this situation.

Should the Demon King be killed, spared, or released?

Lost at the crossroads of destruction, where no answer could be right, Bertus felt disoriented.

Olivia Lanze returned to the Imperial Capital.

The lengthy investigation into the followers of the Demon God Cult was finally coming to a close.

The Gelkorgis Desert in the southern continent, where desertification had

progressed too far and countless abandoned cities had become the stronghold of the Demon God Cult followers.

It was natural that the headquarters of the Demon God Cult would be located in the uninhabited wilderness of the vast desert area.

The immense divine power of the Demon God that Olivia possessed was, in itself, a form of identification and a ticket to enter.

Olivia's original intention was to be prepared to annihilate the Demon King if he revealed himself among the followers of the Demon God Cult.

However, the followers knew nothing of the Demon King. They merely spouted nonsense about the Demon King representing the will of the demons, but they had no real connection with him.

Knowing that they were just followers who chose to follow the Demon King of their own accord, she could only conclude that the previous attack on Rajeurn by the Demon God Cult followers was not the work of the Demon King himself.

Since killing the Demon King directly was impossible, Olivia decided on an alternative course of action.

She planned to completely eradicate the Demon God Cult followers, who could eventually side with the Demon King.

That was a task she couldn't do alone, so Olivia returned to the Imperial Capital.

She intended to lead the Holy Knights and sweep the Gelkorgis Desert clean.

The situation would be even more complicated if the Demon King made full contact with the followers, so now was the right time.

With such thoughts, Olivia encountered something strange upon her return to the Imperial Capital.

"Olivia Lanche, please come with us for a moment."

Even before she arrived at the headquarters of the Holy Knights, imperial knights blocked Olivia's path.

Instead of going to the Holy Knights' headquarters, Olivia was led by the knights to the temple.

Although she had intended to see Reinhardt's face at the temple anyway, it was still an odd feeling, as if she had been dragged there.

And Olivia felt something was off.

Of course, considering the current situation, the atmosphere inside the temple seemed excessively tense.

Most of the people coming and going were not students, and there were even more armed soldiers than usual.

The knights and mages escorting Olivia also appeared far from ordinary.

Inside the temple, in a consultation room at the main building.

However, unable to hide the feeling that she had been brought to an interrogation room, someone soon entered.

A knight from Shanafel whom she had seen during the raid on Rezaira: Scottla Kelton sat down in front of Olivia.

"I told them not to use forceful means, but I'm not sure if they did. How are you?"

Olivia stared silently at the stern-faced middle-aged knight.

"It wasn't forceful, but… what's going on? Did I do something wrong?"

The strange atmosphere had made Olivia irritable.

As she had accurately identified the positions of the Demon God Cult believers, she had not made a mistake but rather brought great benefit to the empire. Of course, she hadn't reported it yet.

At Olivia's words, Scottla Kelton lowered his head.

"No, not at all. We trust you, Olivia. However, due to an important fact that has come to light recently, we must pay close attention to you."

"An important fact?"

"…"

Scottla Kelton gazed at Olivia silently.

As if deeply contemplating something.

"Olivia, would you summon Tiamata?"

"…?"

As if there was no reason not to, Olivia summoned Tiamata and placed it on the table.

"You share Tiamata with Reinhardt, don't you?"

Scottla Kelton had seen Olivia wielding Tiamata, which should have belonged to Reinhardt, during the Rezaira incident.

"Yes, you saw it."

Olivia furrowed her brow, as if asking why he was bringing up something she already knew. Growing increasingly annoyed by the incomprehensible situation, Scottla Kelton nodded with a stern expression.

"Reinhardt has been identified as the Demon King."

“…What?"

Unable to help her confusion, Olivia had just heard something that made no sense.

What did I just hear?

Even when she thought about each word separately, she couldn't understand the meaning of what she had just heard.

However, Scottla Kelton did not provide a detailed explanation.

"Thus, Olivia, who is essentially soul-bound to the Demon King, can only be considered a person of interest."

"Wait, what are you talking about?!"

"Olivia, I believe you are innocent. However… I recommend you stay in the main building until the situation is resolved."

"What…?"

"Please, Olivia… We don't want to do this either."

Scottla Kelton left the consultation room.

Olivia was dumbfounded, unable to understand what was happening.

Soon after leaving the consultation room, Olivia was escorted by knights to a staff dormitory in the main building.

It was imprisonment in all but name. Not only was Olivia inside the dormitory, but a Shanafel knight had also taken up residence.

It was clear that she was being monitored in real time.

"What's going on? I should know what's happening too. If you just casually throw at me that Reinhardt is the Demon King, what am I supposed to do?"

Although Scottla Kelton was not the one assigned to watch her, the one who was assigned was a member of the Shanafel, the strongest knight order of the empire.

It was evident that they were capable of suppressing Olivia in case of emergency, and this person was not the only one.

The Shanafel knight stared intently at Olivia with a stern expression.

"Exactly as I said, Olivia. Reinhardt, the wielder of Alsbringer and Tiamata, was the

Demon King who had infiltrated the temple. It has recently come to light, and he is currently imprisoned within the temple while discussions are underway to determine his fate."

Though the explanation was longer than Scottla Kelton's, Olivia still couldn't understand it.

"Furthermore, you were saved by the Demon King's forces during the death of Riverrier Lanze but have been hiding this fact ever since. Although we cannot determine if it was your intention, considering that you share Tiamata with the Demon King, the empire has deemed it necessary to keep an eye on you, Olivia."

"…"

"Olivia, if you behave for just a few days, there will be no trouble."

In the end, although there was a possibility that Olivia was not involved with the Demon King, the empire was keeping her under surveillance because of that possibility.

Until the Demon King's fate was decided.

Olivia swallowed her saliva.

Something.

It was clear that very strange things were happening, most of which Olivia couldn't even accept.

But there was one sentence that kept echoing in her head.

Reinhardt was the Demon King.

That's why she, who shares Tiamata with the Demon King, was under suspicion.

Also, the fact that she had been at the scene of Riverrier Lanze's murder but had kept that secret until now.

Because of that, she couldn't help but be suspected of being in league with the Demon King.

Olivia could barely understand that much.

"Reinhardt is… the Demon King…?"

Just that one truth.

If she could accept that, all the scattered puzzles that had been complicating Olivia's life so far would fit together.

That day, Olivia was tormented by the fact that she couldn't understand the Demon King's actions.

Why did he save me?

Did he save me, an illegitimate child, while trying to kill Riverrier Lanze? Why?

Attacking the nameless religious order would only benefit the empire, so why did he do something good for the empire?

Olivia had been confused up until now because she couldn't understand the Demon King's intentions.

But now, Reinhardt was the Demon King.

If that was the case, everything made sense.

He was trying to protect her.

There was no other reason.

Somehow, Reinhardt had learned that Olivia was in danger. That's why he had led his forces to attack Riverrier Lanze.

The nameless monastery and Riverrier Lanze itself had no meaning.

It was a story where he had saved them only because Olivia and Adriana were in danger.

The last piece of the puzzle fit.

The Demon King and Reinhardt.

If the two were the same, she could understand and accept all the situations.

If the attack on the Rajeurn by the Demon God Cult was the work of the Demon King, she thought the Demon King must be an evil being.

But now Olivia knew that the Demon God Cult was actually unrelated to the Demon King.

He won't choose me.

Reinhardt won't look at me.

He's always looking somewhere else.

I'm pouring my heart out to him, but he keeps turning away from me.

It's heartbreaking.

That's what I thought.

But I was wrong.

Reinhardt had already saved me, taking great risks to do so.

He did it the first time, and he did it again.

Reinhardt saved me twice.

"…"

What did it mean when you said you'd do anything for me, even if I don't look at you?

What did it mean when you said you'd be on my side, even if I don't choose you?
What a trivial thing to say.

Unbeknownst to her, Reinhardt had already saved her, risking his life and mobilizing his not-so-substantial forces to face the elite holy knights.

He even risked exposing his identity.

While she swore to save Reinhardt with words alone, Reinhardt had actually saved Olivia. And he never let it show.

And yet, she was feeling sorrowful.

And yet, she was feeling resentful.

And yet, she complained that he wouldn't look at her.

Olivia's face went pale, her mouth gaping open in shock.

How hurt he must have been.

How ridiculous it must have seemed.

How hurt he must have been every time she complained.

He couldn't reveal the truth, so he must have been consumed with frustration.

Upon realizing what sacrifices Reinhardt had made for her, Olivia didn't care that he was the Demon King.

Rather, things she couldn't understand began to make sense, and Olivia's resolve grew stronger.

Her words from before.

There was one part of it she couldn't keep now.

Because Reinhardt was the Demon King.

She couldn't let the Demon King hurt Reinhardt.

No matter what happened.

Even if the world turned upside down.

Even if the world tried to hurt him.

No matter what happened.

She decided to protect Reinhardt.

The world was trying to kill Reinhardt, the Demon King.

"…"

So, Olivia had to protect the Demon King. She stared at the silent Shanafel Knight.

The knight stared back at her.

The empire suspected Olivia. They thought she might be on the side of the Demon King.

She wasn't, until now.

Olivia was on neither the humans' nor the demons' side, but solely on Reinhardt's side.

Reinhardt was imprisoned somewhere in the temple.

She didn't know the exact reason, but the empire wouldn't kill the Demon King immediately.

A few days' reprieve.

However, now Olivia couldn't even shake off the Shanafel Knight watching her, let alone the one in front of her.

So, she couldn't break into the heavily guarded place where Reinhardt was imprisoned.

It would be certain death.

She could risk her life for Reinhardt, but she didn't want to choose a pointless death with no chance of success.

She had to risk her life on a plan with at least a possibility of success.

She couldn't save Reinhardt alone.

So, she wouldn't be alone.

Reinhardt wouldn't be alone.

"Please summon the Holy Knight Commander."

“…Pardon?"

At Olivia's words, the Shanafel Knight keeping watch tilted his head.

"As the Champion of the Tu'an and the future of the Five Great Religions, I need to report this matter to the church and discuss our stance and response to the situation. Right now."

"Miss Olivia, what are you talking about…”

"Remember that you are not detaining a mere temple student. You are exerting political pressure on the Champion of Tu'an, who represents the will of the Five Great Religions."

"What do you mean, Lady Olivia? This is… surely not that kind of issue, is it?"

"The Demon King is the chosen champion of Als and Tu’an. We must investigate whether there was any foul play involved in that selection, not only through interpreting the doctrine but also by conducting religious trials. All the major religious orders of the Five Great Religions must gather and discuss whether the gods truly chose the Demon King for a reason, or if there is some wicked trickery at play."

Olivia intended to turn this matter into a political issue.

This was not a problem between humans and demons.

It was a problem between gods and humans.

"You may silence me, but remember, detaining me like this will only lead to great discord between the empire and the religious orders."

If you prevent me from reporting this issue to the order, you may eventually have to wage war against us.

"So call the Holy Knight Commander. Before I decide to leave this place on my own."

That's what I'll make happen.

That was what Olivia was saying with her eyes alone.

"And, it's not like I'm unable to handle all of you. If you think I can't manage to escape…"

Olivia glanced out the window and flashed a sinister grin.

"That would be a grave mistake."

With a gloomy smile, Olivia looked at the increasingly unnerved Shanafel Knight.

Even in confinement, Olivia managed to threaten her captors.

Chapter 441

"Damn it… This wretched fool…”

Bertus clenched his teeth upon hearing the story of Olivia Lanze.

The fact that Reinhardt was the Demon King had not been revealed to the world, as it could potentially incite religious conflict.

It was dangerous to leave Olivia alone, knowing that she could be connected to the Demon King.

Therefore, the best course of action was to keep her under surveillance for now.

However, Olivia Lanze, who had learned the truth, began her folly.

"She doesn't even bother hiding her intention to side with the Demon King."

More than anything, Olivia's talk of religious trials and discussions seemed to be a clear sign of her intent to buy time.

It wasn't just a vague hesitation; she had clearly made up her mind to protect the Demon King.

Olivia Lanze had willingly become an enemy of the Empire, if not humanity itself.

"Does she want to die?"

Bertus clenched his teeth at the report from Scottla Kelton.

"We can kill her, but it's right in the middle of the temple. It's impossible to do it quietly without causing a commotion."

The Grand Library was one of the central locations of the temple.

A fight between Olivia Lanze and the Shanafel Knights attempting to kill her would inevitably be witnessed by many.

At this point, Olivia Lanze was an even more difficult target to kill than the Demon King.

The Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions would hold the Empire accountable for killing the Champion of Tu’an, and it would likely incite intense resentment among the majority of believers.

A lengthy announcement stating that she had to be killed because she sided with the Demon King would not suffice.

People would only accept the simple truth: "The Empire killed the Champion of Tu’an."

Olivia Lanze was well aware of how politically and religiously important her life was.

Killing her would cause conflict between the Empire and the religious order before the Demon King's death.

Moreover, the Demon King possessed not one, but two sacred relics.

Thus, this was not only an issue for the Empire but also a religious matter. Therefore, the decision regarding the Demon King's fate could not be made solely by the Empire.

The Five Great Religions had more than enough reason to intervene in this matter.

If left alone, Olivia would escape the temple on her own and head towards the Holy Knights.

And then, Olivia Lanze would lead a massive army of Holy Knights to the temple's door, demanding a discussion on the Demon King's fate.

Whether to kill or save the Demon King should be our decision to make.

Olivia Lanze would threaten the Empire, warning that killing the Demon King carelessly would not end well.

Bertus had once told Reinhardt that the most significant disasters were often caused by stubborn fools.

He was talking about Olivia Lanze when he said that.

A madwoman screaming not to kill the Demon King in front of people.

Olivia Lanze.

All the talk about the Five Great Religions was nothing more than an excuse.

This fool was neither on the side of the religious order nor the Empire, but solely on the Demon King's side, and she didn't even try to hide it.

Her logic would be clear.

Not one, but two sacred relics.

If two of the five gods had chosen the Demon King, shouldn't he be the rightful choice? Instead of hating each other, they should all find a way to live together. With no pretense, she would create nonsense driven solely by her intention to save the Demon King.

"I can't take this anymore…"

She could neither be killed nor spared.

When the Five Holy Religions began to meddle in the matters the Empire intended to handle quietly, the situation spiraled out of control.

More importantly, Olivia Lanze intended to keep the Demon King alive, disregarding the Holy Religions' goals.

In doing so, she would cause great confusion among the masses by spreading a rumor that Reinhardt, known as the hero, was actually the Demon King.

Bertus felt as if he were watching a dragon writhing in its efforts to throw the Empire into chaos.

"Summon Eleion Bolton," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"What choice do we have? Better to let the Demon King live a little longer than to kill Olivia Lanze and see the Empire split in two, right? It would be thousands of times better to wage war against the demons, and if that happens, the Empire will only grow stronger, not fall apart."

Bertus was growing tired.

For days, he had been pushed to the limits of his mental strength.

Eleion Bolton arrived at the temple, leading his agents due to the problem caused by Olivia Lanze.

Olivia Lanze intended to reveal information that was strictly confidential, information that would undoubtedly plunge the world into chaos if it became known.

There was a Demon King chosen by the sacred relics.

What would humanity think of this?

As Olivia was about to discuss the matter with the Holy Knight Commander, she rose from her seat when Eleion Bolton arrived.

"What's going on, Olivia?"

"Let's go outside first."

Now that someone had come to take her away, Olivia no longer wished to remain imprisoned.

"Miss Olivia! You can't leave!"

A knight of Shanafel, who had been watching over Olivia, blocked her way.

"You must speak here. You cannot leave."

Sensing that something was amiss with the determined attitudes of the Shanafel knights, the agents, including the Holy Knight Commander, realized the situation was

taking an unexpected turn.

While the Holy Knights knew something was happening in the temple, they had no idea about the specific details.

"Who are you to order me around?"

Approaching the knight, Olivia gave a sneering smile.

"The responsibility for my safety lies with the Holy Knights and the Five Holy Religions, not with the Empire. The temple? I couldn't care less. The Empire has no authority to command where I go or come."

"…"

"Blocking my way is a challenge to the Holy Knights and a heretical act against the will of the Holy Religions and its followers across the continent."

Olivia stated calmly.

"Step aside. How dare you block the path of the Champion of Tu'an?"

She was not alone; she was with the Holy Knight Commander.

Olivia was not relying on her personal power, but rather the symbolism and political position she held.

Thus, Shanafel had no choice but to let her pass.

All of Shanafel's knights could only grit their teeth as they watched Olivia Lanze, who was leaving with a bomb that could shake the entire continent.

Olivia Lanze explained the entire situation to Holy Knight Commander Eleion Bolton.

Originally, he only had Alsbringer, but she also revealed the fact that Reinhardt shared Tiamata with her.

Reinhardt, chosen by two sacred relics, was the Demon King.

Therefore, an emergency meeting must be convened with the leaders of the Five Holy Religions. They needed to hold a doctrinal conference or a religious trial to address the matter.

Eleion Bolton was, of course, shocked.

That alone was enough of a message.

She left the matter to Eleion Bolton, which the Religions should have dealt with.

The revelation that the Demon King was the master of the Sacred Artifact had the potential to send shockwaves throughout the entire Holy Religions.

Priests and holy knights were sure to be divided on this matter.

Therefore, Olivia took action before a decision could come down from her superiors.

Such tasks were quite easy for her.

At the Holy Knights' headquarters, she gathered priests and followers for an impromptu sermon.

As the Champion of Tu’an, many couldn't help but attend her sermon.

Olivia didn't say much.

"The gods are always right, aren't they?"

At Olivia's gentle words, the numerous attendees nodded their heads.

"The gods know and plan everything, isn't that so?"

"Thus, the choices of the gods cannot be wrong or denied, and the grace they bestow upon us is evidence that the gods are right and a sign of their love for us."

"So, those who have received such divine grace are worthy of love, and it is clear that their existence must be affirmed, just as we are chosen to receive the love of the gods."

"The most powerful and indisputable grace and evidence."

"The Sacred Artifact."

Olivia summoned Tiamata into her right hand and held it up high.

-Ooh…

Some marveled at the faint divine light emanating from Tiamata, while others were moved by the grace of the Sacred Artifact.

"As one who has been chosen by such a Sacred Artifact, I may presume to represent the will of the gods to some extent."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Demon King, who has caused such an uproar in the world, is now imprisoned in the temple."

-Ooh!

The news that the feared Demon King had been captured caused a great stir in the crowd, bringing a mix of shock, admiration, and relief to everyone present.

"Perhaps you've heard of the new hero, Reinhardt."

Olivia smiled.

"It turns out that the hero chosen by the War God Als was actually the Demon King, who had infiltrated the human world."

Naturally, the crowd's admiration turned to shock. As everyone buzzed with excitement, Olivia continued.

"I do not know the exact circumstances yet. However, the important point is that even if the Demon King disguised himself as a hero, the fact that he was chosen by Alsbringer does not change."

The storm of shocking information left those listening to the sermon unable to regain their composure.

But one thing was clear in their minds.

The Demon King had infiltrated human society.

Under the name Reinhardt.

And he had been chosen by Als.

"Of course, it's possible that the Demon King used some wicked trick to gain Alsbringer's favor."

Wicked trick.

The all-purpose word helped the confused listeners regain some semblance of composure.

Olivia, who was trying to save Reinhardt, should not have said that.

But, in fact, this was crucial.

"The Holy Knights and the Five Holy Religions have a duty to prove whether the Demon King truly received Als's choice."

"Right now, the Demon King is in the hands of the Empire."

"But this is our problem."

"It is our duty and right to discuss and decide upon the treatment of the Demon King after determining whether he received the gods' choice."

"It is not the Empire but us who must judge whether the Demon King received the choice of the Sacred Artifact or whether he stole it through some foul means from someone else who should have received it."

"Starting now, I plan to go to the temple to take custody of the Demon King."

"I have no doubt in my belief that determining the truth or falsehood of the Demon King's claim is the sacred duty bestowed upon me by the gods."

"In the name of the Five Great Gods."

"In the name of Tu'an, the Goddes of Purity."

"I will judge whether he is noble or not under the name of the gods."

A political ploy to free the Demon King from the Empire’s clutches.

Olivia Lanze had set off a massive disaster.

Countless seeds of chaos had been sown.

Now, they would sprout and bring forth immense confusion.

Olivia did not insist that the Demon King was a righteous being simply because he had been chosen by the sacred relic.

Such an extreme claim would only invite opposition.

It was true that the Demon King had been chosen by the sacred relic. Therefore, a discussion about his right or wrong should precede, and they should be the ones to lead that discussion.

Olivia's words—that since it was their problem, it should be made their problem—could only be seen as the logical course of action.

Though the followers were confused, Olivia prioritized action.

Olivia Lanze, who had left the temple, returned about five hours later.

She was not alone.

She brought with her over two hundred knights, the elite of the Holy Knights.

The atmosphere among the knights was tense.

The knights were not only shocked that the Demon King had been chosen by the sacred relic, but also furious that the empire had tried to secretly handle the matter.

All of the Holy Knights agreed with Olivia Lanze's opinion that they should be the ones to judge the Demon King's fate.

Standing before the temple guards blocking the entrance and Shanafel, Olivia stepped forward.

"We are carrying out a sacred duty. Make way."

"The temple is not a place for the Holy Knights to come and go as they please. It belongs to the empire."

"All lands were created by the gods and thus, are blessed by them. If all lands belong to the Five Great Gods, what land is there that we, who carry out their commands, cannot enter?"

As if she had never forsaken the gods, Olivia eloquently spoke her piece.

"You are interfering with a crucial religious matter of the Holy Knights and the Church of the Five Great Gods. Step aside, we will discuss the disposal of the Demon King."

"As I have said before, you cannot enter."

"I will take that as permission to use force."

Shing!

Olivia threateningly unsheathed Tiamata, which she had deliberately sheathed.

The knights, too, nervously unsheathed their swords as Olivia drew hers.

They were all on edge due to Olivia's actions.

Tu'an's champion, Olivia Lanze, was crossing a line.

If she clashed with the temple's forces here, the situation would spiral out of control. Whether Olivia's actions were right or wrong, it would cause an official collision between the Church of the Five Great Gods and the empire.

This confrontation at the temple entrance could even be remembered as the starting point of a religious war.

That was why not only the temple guards but also the knights who had followed Olivia were taken aback by her righteous madness.

No one had thought she would go this far.

"Champion, any further and…"

That was why one of the knights who had followed Olivia gulped and tried to dissuade her.

"Are you doubting my will now?"

To oppose my will is to oppose the will of Tu'an.

With her gaze alone, Olivia implied that even a fellow knight's head could be severed if they opposed her.

Olivia Lanze was demonstrating how she could twist logic and drive the situation to the brink of insanity as the champion of the gods.

The Five Great Gods, indeed.

The sacred relics, indeed.

The confusion of the followers and the religious war, whatever.

Just let it be.

It's merely a pretense.

This incident could lead to a religious war that could tear the empire apart, and the confrontation between the religious and imperial forces could become the starting point for a continent-wide war and massacre.

Olivia doesn't care about that.

The world, whatever.

Humanity, whatever.

It's not Olivia's concern whether it collapses or not.

Olivia Lanze is trying to save Reinhardt.

So, she will clear away anything that stands in her way.

Even if it's a god itself.

"Step aside if you don't want war."

At Olivia's menacing words, not only the guards but also the knights who had followed her had no choice but to hold their breath.

Righteous madness.

The worst possible situation it could create was unfolding right now.

Chapter 442

There is a saying that one avoids something not out of fear, but out of disgust.

Yet Olivia Lanze was both filthy and terrifying.

When Olivia pushed forward, daring anyone to stop her if they wished for war, swords were drawn against her, and in that instant, war broke out.

No one wanted to be the catalyst for a war that could potentially split the continent in two - except for Olivia Lanze.

Eventually, leading the Holy Knights, Olivia crossed the Temple Gate and arrived at the temporary detention facility where Reinhardt was imprisoned.

The knights and mages of Shanafel, as well as the Temple's forces, were blocking her from advancing any further.

The Empire should never have informed Olivia.

While it was prudent to keep an eye on her due to uncertainty about her allegiance to the Demon King, their decision now had terrible consequences for the Empire.

With the Holy Knights at her command, Olivia stood at the forefront, facing Bertus, who was blocking her path.

Behind Bertus were Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps.

Behind Olivia were the Holy Knights of the Holy Order.

"Move aside."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, senior."

Bertus, at his breaking point with a mix of annoyance and anger, stared at Olivia.

"The authority over the Demon King's well-being is ours. Hand it over."

At Olivia's nonchalant demand, Bertus gritted his teeth.

There was no need to persuade her that her actions could potentially divide the continent and lead to humanity's downfall.

Outwardly, she might pretend to care, but inwardly, she would undoubtedly think, "So what?"

"The Empire is the representative of humanity. Therefore, it is only right that the Empire's royal family decides the fate of the enemy of humanity, the Demon King."

At Bertus's words, Olivia smirked.

"Humans are creations of the gods. The Empire may represent humanity, but isn't it only natural that the Holy Order, which represents the will of the gods, and the Five Great Churches have higher authority? Represent humanity all you want."

Olivia raised the corner of her lips.

"I represent the will of the gods."

Because the gods created humanity, their will is superior to human will. The gods' will is more righteous. And as the chosen champion, I represent the gods' will.

To oppose me is to oppose the gods.

Olivia relentlessly pushed this horrifying logic, which would arise if the champion of the gods used their authority violently.

As Eleris once told Reinhardt, relics are not only powerful items but also have immense political value.

Olivia Lanze was fulfilling that statement perfectly.

Facing Olivia's attitude, Bertus, as well as the Empire's knights and mages, were growing weary.

What was the difference between this and madness?

Was it permissible for a champion chosen by the gods to be so reckless?

Why had someone who behaved so outrageously been chosen by the gods?

Those not close to the gods began to doubt their intentions.

However, the Holy Knights, equally weary, gradually began to think differently as they witnessed Olivia's behavior.

The Holy Knights were close to the gods.

The gods were right.

Therefore, the owners of the divine relics, the champions, were the second most righteous.

The fact that Olivia Lanze, chosen by Tu'an, exhibited such behavior meant that the gods deemed it necessary to display such a radical will.

The champion's violent, aggressive, and somewhat insane actions were not because they had gone mad.

The gods desire such actions.

All things in the world are within the gods' purview.

The Champion represents the will of the gods.

Thus, the more radical, the more blind, and the more violent Olivia's actions are.

The conclusion is drawn that the gods desire extreme actions.

To those not close to the gods, she appears as a Champion driven by madness.

But as the holy knights witness Olivia's oppressive actions, the more extreme she is, the more they realize the gods support this extremity.

The atmosphere among the holy knights shifts momentarily, from the dread of a possible continental war.

Realizing that they can only support Olivia's actions, which must be righteous, and acknowledging that it is the will of the gods.

Gradually, determination fills their eyes.

Faith, and belief.

These bring about different conclusions and actions than the common.

"Regarding the Demon King's well-being, our argument is valid. Does the Empire have any evidence to deny this?"

As Olivia speaks, the holy knights gradually begin to exude a menacing aura.

With the Champion on our side, we are right.

Even if we die here, even if it leads to war, it is the will of the gods.

To die here is to die very close to the will of the gods.

How could this not be glorious?

"The Empire has identified and secured the true nature of the Demon King. The Order of Holy Knights is now trying to steal the Empire's achievement."

At Bertus's words, Olivia tilts her head.

"Yes, we appreciate your hard work. The Five Great Churches will express their gratitude to the Empire and pray for the blessings of the gods."

It is sophistry, but it becomes right under the name of the gods.

If the gods say to see white as black, one must do so.

The eyes that cannot do this become wrong.

Why do your eyes see white when they were told to see black?

Only the gods can say such things.

The Champion is their spokesperson.

"I am here to fulfill my duty, not to claim my rights. I have a duty to judge whether

the Demon King is a noble being or not."

Bertus grits his teeth.

There are many things to say.

You, who share Tiamata with the Demon King, are ultimately doing this to protect the Demon King, aren't you?

Aren't you impure from the moment your soul was shared with the Demon King?

Haven't you had your life saved by the Demon King?

Aren't you, the enemy of humanity?

However, all these words will lead to great conflict.

To say that the Champion of Two Eyes is not noble is already a grave blasphemy.

Doubting Olivia's intentions ultimately means doubting the will of the gods.

Of course, the Empire is strong.

Thus, they can doubt the will of the gods.

Even if the gods are absolute, if they disagree, that is all there is to it.

The gods are transcendent beings who lend their power to the world, but they have not granted the right to represent their absolute will to those who wield that power, or so one could argue.

No matter how powerful the Order of Holy Knights and the Five Great Churches are, the Empire can easily push them aside if they wish.

However, religion itself is a focal point, and if the Empire tears it apart, it loses its grand mission of embracing all humanity.

The Empire can annihilate the Five Great Churches and the Order of Holy Knights, but then the Empire will collapse.

The Empire, founded on the idea of gathering numerous races, cultures, and beliefs to stand against the demons.

For such an empire to exterminate such a large group inevitably leads to a situation in which the empire loses its legitimacy.

Bertus had much to think about.

There were many things to protect.

The Empire, the Royal Family, humanity.

He had to speak and act to protect things that were overwhelmingly vast.

But Olivia wanted only one thing.

Reinhardt.

That's why she didn't think about what would happen later, but put everything into saving Reinhardt right now.

"I told you to step aside."

As Olivia took a step, the knights behind her also advanced with an oppressive force.

Shanafel, the Royal Mages, and Bertus did not back down.

However, if they continued, a clash would occur.

It was a highly tense situation.

If they hand over the Demon King to Olivia instead of going to war, the outcome was clear.

Olivia would argue that since the Demon King was chosen by the sacred relic, the Five Great Churches should support him.

No one knew where this would lead.

War was always the worst choice. Even more so when it was between humans.

This moment had to be stopped.

The mad march of Olivia had to be halted.

"How about talking with the Demon King for a moment?"

"What?"

"You know well that demanding the handover of the Demon King is absurd. But we don't intend to deny the legitimacy of the Holy Knights."

First, they had to stop the imminent collision.

A single word, a gesture could lead to war.

A bait was thrown.

"Talk with the Demon King for a moment, and discuss things in a calmer state."

"…"

Olivia stared at Bertus.

She knew that war was the worst option.

And she didn't think that taking back Reinhardt right now was possible.

She came to deliver a de facto warning that if they decided the Demon King's fate on their own, a catastrophic event would occur.

It was to make the Empire hesitate to execute Reinhardt immediately.

And in the long run, she planned to find another way to save Reinhardt.

He would allow her to meet Reinhardt.

So step back for now.

"Fine."

Olivia accepted the proposal.

"I'll guide you."

Of course, not all knights could enter, so only Olivia, their representative, could go inside.

As if not intending to overreach further, Olivia followed the guidance of Shanafel's knights and entered the prison building.

For now, they bought some time.

After confirming Olivia had left, Bertus approached one of the knights.

The legitimacy Olivia held.

The sacred relic.

An undeniable existence chosen by the sacred relic.

The Demon King and Olivia Lanze.

And one more person.

A person whose existence itself was legitimacy.

Someone who could stand against Olivia Lanze without losing, or even have a stronger legitimacy.

"Bring Ellen Artorius, immediately."

They needed Ellen Artorius.

—---

Temporary underground prison.

Guided by Shanafel's knights, Olivia was able to descend to the underground prison where Reinhardt was held.

As soon as she arrived, there was only one thing she felt.

'Escaping by force is impossible.'

The external forces were a problem, but the individuals within the underground prison surpassed even the boundaries of superhumans.

Grandmaster Saviolin Turner was present to prepare for any situation, along with numerous archmages and countless swordmasters.

Saviolin Turner, the person in charge, had been living here, not even taking shifts.

“…I wondered if there was trouble."

Seeing Olivia's stern expression, Saviolin Turner bit her lip.

"I have the prince's permission."

As if she had heard about the situation roughly, Turner narrowed her brow and stepped aside.

At last, Olivia could see Reinhardt, lying stretched out and bound in chains.

A gag had been fastened around his mouth, and his eyes were open.

With her fists clenched tightly, Olivia approached Reinhardt and knelt before him.

To Reinhardt, who had watched over her for so long, protected her, and now found himself in such a miserable state.

To her Demon King.

Olivia employed her holy power to heal the battered Reinhardt.

"Reinhardt…”

As she tended to Reinhardt, tears welled up in Olivia's eyes.

His unfocused gaze shifted, and at last, he looked directly at Olivia. Though his eyes were still cloudy, he recognized her.

"Sister… you're here…”

"…”

"I promise… I'll save you."

With these words, Olivia gently embraced Reinhardt's bound neck.

After a brief hug, Olivia reached for the gag in Reinhardt's mouth.

Woosh!

"Don't touch it. There's a reason it's there," Saviolin Turner warned, pointing her sword at Olivia's neck.

"If you want to kill me, go ahead."

If she couldn't even exchange words with Reinhardt in this wretched state, she would rather die.

Unfazed by Saviolin Turner's sword touching her throat, Olivia removed Reinhardt's gag.

Thud

Though Olivia had healed him, Reinhardt still appeared weak and listless, his eyes unfocused.

In the end, Saviolin Turner couldn't bring herself to strike Olivia down.

"Reinhardt, you've done nothing wrong, right? You… you're innocent. We'll convene a meeting of the Five Holy Orders and prove that you're not evil. So, please…”

"Sister…”

Reinhardt called out to Olivia in a hoarse, strained voice.

It was the first time he had addressed her in such a manner, so Olivia stared at him with wide eyes.

"Don't do it…”

"What?"

"Don't… do something like that…”

With great difficulty, Reinhardt raised his head and spoke quietly, his eyes still unfocused.

"Sister… you'll die…”

Those words.

Even in his current state, he was worried for Olivia and told her not to do anything dangerous.

"Don't die… after saving me… Don't waste it… doing something pointless…”

Those words.

"It's a waste… how can you… after saving me…”

"Sob…”

Hearing this, Olivia finally broke down in tears.

She couldn't bear to see Reinhardt, who, even in his near-death state, was more concerned for her than for himself.

"Do you really think… he’s evil?"

Tears streaming down her face, Olivia looked at Saviolin Turner, who still held her sword to her throat.

"Do you really think… Reinhardt is evil?"

"Even if he's the Demon King, how can someone who's worried for me in a situation like this be evil? There's no way… There's just no way…”

"Reinhardt must have had his reasons…”

"There must have been a reason for everything Reinhardt has done up until now. We might not know… We need to listen… at least once…"

"Why he did it."

"Why it had to be that way."

"We can at least listen, can't we?"

"Just because he's the Demon King, and just because he's suspicious, is it right to tie him up like an animal, even gagging him? Is this… right? Beyond the will of the gods… beyond all that…"

"It's just too cruel…"

As Olivia sobbed, the tip of Saviolin Turner's sword wavered.

Is the Demon King truly evil?

Even in this situation, there was a being who had once saved Olivia, now warning her that she might be in danger and telling her not to try to save him.

Could such a being truly be evil?

Could this, too, be a deception?

"Leaving aside doubt and circumstance, what harm has Reinhardt done? What has he done, really…?"

The Demon King's first attack was to rescue demon captives being sold as slaves.

The Demon King was capable of that.

The assault on the Holy Knights was to rescue the close acquaintance, Olivia Lanze.

Reinhardt was capable of that.

The final attack was a farce orchestrated by the Empire.

The Demon King had not carried that out.

Saviolin Turner had done it under the orders of the Empire.

The Demon King…

Was he evil?

Saviolin Turner sheathed her sword, biting her lip as she looked at the weeping Olivia Lanze and Reinhardt.

The truth of it all.

What was true and what was false, from beginning to end.

She, too, felt like she would go mad from wanting to know.

Everyone wanted to believe that Reinhardt was not a bad person.

But let's say the Demon King didn't hate humanity.

'Why?'

With only reasons to hate, why on earth wouldn't he?

People felt betrayed by the Demon King because they couldn't accept that part.

However.

"Please… listen to Reinhardt's words… just a little… please… trust him… trust Reinhardt…"

Only Olivia Lanze, with her unwavering trust and love for the Demon King.

Only Olivia Lanze, who had received crucial help from the Demon King several times.

In this situation, she sobbed pitifully, asking them to trust Reinhardt.

Chapter 443

In the end, Olivia had accomplished her goal.

She had created a situation where the Empire could not dispose of Reinhardt on their own.

However, it was impossible for the Holy Knights to take custody of Reinhardt. Bertus knew Olivia's true intentions.

For Reinhardt's sake, Olivia would do everything she could. Since force was not an option, she would use her political influence.

With barely enough strength to speak, Reinhardt was fed water and gruel by Olivia.

Only after she tearfully begged him to eat did Reinhardt reluctantly accept the food she offered.

All of this was witnessed by Saviolin Turner, who quietly watched.

"I'll be back."

Getting up from her seat, Olivia gazed down at Reinhardt with a worried look.

Although she couldn't bear to leave him, she couldn't stay by his side either. The best way to help Reinhardt was to be busy working on his behalf where he couldn't see her.

Gritting her teeth, Olivia passed by Saviolin Turner and walked through the underground prison corridor.

Turner continued to stare at Reinhardt.

Could it be that the Demon King truly had nothing to do with evil?

—---

When Olivia Lanze returned to those waiting above ground, she noticed an extra person who had not been there before.

Somehow, that person always had a vague presence.

A girl with black hair that now appeared to be listlessly hanging down.

Ellen Artorius was standing beside Bertus.

She had no idea why she was summoned there, she simply came when called.

She appeared to be an empty person, devoid of thought or will.

That image was eerily similar to Reinhardt's when he was locked in the underground prison.

Just as Reinhardt had seemed to have given up on everything in despair,

Ellen Artorius also seemed to have given up on everything due to her sense of betrayal.

Seeing Ellen standing next to Bertus, Olivia flashed a bitter smile.

"Ah, I see what you're thinking."

Bertus brought a hero wielding another sacred artifact to counter the threat of Olivia's.

In order to resist Olivia's tyranny, all he needed was someone with stronger justification.

Olivia was the champion chosen by Tiamata.

However, Ellen was Ragan Artorius's younger sister.

She was not only guaranteed the support of the Mencis Sect but also the support of the majority of the population, being Ragan Artorius's sister.

Objectively speaking, Ellen had a stronger claim than Olivia.

Thus, Bertus had brought Ellen to use as a pretext to stop Olivia's tyranny.

Furthermore, Ellen possessed the sacred artifact, Lament.

Only Reinhardt and Charlotte knew that Ellen held Lapelt.

However, if this fact became known, Ellen, as the possessor of two sacred artifacts, would have an even stronger justification than Olivia.

Naturally, the Holy Knights that Olivia had brought would be conflicted if Ellen had different intentions.

The division among the Holy Knights would soon cause a split in support, and Olivia would be unable to continue her tyranny.

However, Olivia stared intently at Ellen.

Olivia was unaware that Ellen had played a crucial role in tracking the Demon King.

She only knew that Ellen had lost everything, as evidenced by her expression.

"Are you okay with this?"

"…"

Ellen had no response to Olivia's words.

"Will you just let Reinhardt be labeled a villain, locked away somewhere to cry miserably, and leave him to die?"

"You're only capable of that much, huh?"

At those words, the light returned to Ellen's lifeless eyes.

Anger.

That cruel statement, implying her feelings were insignificant, left a fresh wound on Ellen's deadened heart.

"What do you know, senior?"

"I don't know everything, do I?"

Olivia raised the corner of her mouth slightly.

"But I do know that you'll stay cooped up in your room, pining and lamenting that 'Reinhardt is the evil son of the Demon King who killed my brother.'"

Ellen clenched her teeth at the provocation.

"My feelings… what I… what I think… how much I loved Reinhardt… how I feel… how can you know… how can you know… what do you know, senior?"

In the end, Ellen's lips quivered, and tears fell as Olivia covered her mouth, laughing.

"Oh, right, you must be so sad. Cry. Cry all you want. Who cares?"

Olivia displayed a gloomy smile.

As if she'd forgotten that countless warriors and holy knights were watching.

As if only expressing her feelings and laying them bare mattered.

"Reinhardt could be evil. He could be a bad guy. He could be scheming something incredibly wicked. Yeah, it's possible."

"But still."

"I'll believe in Reinhardt till the end."

"Even if I'm betrayed or hurt at the very end."

"Even if my beliefs turn out to be wrong."

"I'll believe in Reinhardt."

"So, you were only capable of that much."

"Reinhardt is the Demon King. It's too scary and sad, and you're going crazy from the betrayal."

"Stay like that. Stay like that and die miserably, like a fool."

"If there's a choice between being unhappy by believing and being unhappy by not believing."

"I'll be unhappy by believing. You get it?"

"I'm different from someone like you."

It was a statement that shouldn't have been made in front of the holy knights.

But Olivia calmly spat out those words.

I believe in the Demon King.

"Let's go back."

With a bombshell declaration, Olivia gestured to the holy knights, their faces drained of color.

With her hands in her pockets, fidgeting.

She led the holy knights back, not as a champion but more like a neighborhood thug.

Ellen's face turned pale.

Was I really only capable of that much?

Unable to even consider listening to the story out of fear.

Unhappy by believing, or unhappy by not believing.

If both led to unhappiness, which unhappiness was better?

She had remained hidden in her room, shocked by the thought of having been deceived all this time.

Olivia Lanze's words were all true.

Her feelings weren't false.

She thought her love wouldn't lose to anyone in size.

But fear and betrayal had turned her into a shell, living like this.

Ellen didn't know many things, but there was one thing she knew.

She didn't know what she was good at.

But constantly crying like this must be wrong.

—---

Olivia Lanze led the holy knights back.

Before everyone on the continent knew of the hero's existence, the rumor that the hero was the Demon King would spread.

Conflict with religious groups would become inevitable. Now, Bertus had to prevent this from escalating into a full-scale war.

After Olivia left and the alert was lifted, Bertus brought Ellen to his office.

Reinhardt was indeed the Demon King.

But Olivia Lanze still chose to believe in Reinhardt.

It wasn't because he'd saved her several times that she could believe in him; she didn't want to think that way.

Believing and being unhappy, not believing and being unhappy.

If there were two paths, Olivia Lanze said she would choose to believe and be unhappy.

You were only worth that much.

Olivia's words painfully pierced Ellen's heart.

Was it something worth believing?

Hiding such a thing, should it be believed?

Is it possible?

It's impossible.

It seems impossible.

Ellen had just seen someone for whom it was possible.

Of course, in a sense, Olivia was indebted to the Demon King, so it was easier for her to believe in him.

Ellen thinks.

About everything that has happened so far.

All that time may not have been false. Could believing in Reinhardt turn all the time that has become fake into something real?

Should I have believed more?

In Reinhardt?

Olivia was able to do something that Ellen couldn't.

Was I really worth just that much?

"…"

Ellen stared blankly at the table with empty eyes.

"Ellen, you have the right to attend the Papal Conclave of the Five Major Religions Order. You know that, right?"

"……Yeah?"

At Bertus's words, Ellen mumbled blankly.

"Olivia Lanze will try to justify the Demon King's actions after pulling him to the side

of the Holy Knights. So, you are the only one who can suppress that insane woman's right to speak."

“…I guess so."

"…”

At Ellen's lifeless response, Bertus crossed his arms and looked at her.

"Don't tell me you want to believe in Reinhardt, too?"

"…”

"Everyone feels the same way. We all wish that the insane things Reinhardt says were true. But it's impossible to believe. It doesn't make sense. And even if Reinhardt's intentions were true, the problem remains the same."

Ellen bit her lip.

"Olivia will claim that since the Demon King was chosen by two sacred relics, he should naturally be recognized as a champion. Then humanity will have the power to seize both the Holy Order and the Demon God Cult. Regardless of whether Reinhardt really doesn't hate humans, the continent will split in two and another demonic war could break out. The division is certain regardless of Reinhardt's intentions."

Being not only the Demon King but also the champion of the gods.

And the followers of the Demon God Cult follow the Demon King.

It achieves the miraculous event of uniting the Theocratic Order and the Demon God Cult, creating a perfectly exclusive force against the Empire.

Reinhardt's existence is so enormous that even if he doesn't want conflict, it's clear that he will be the starting point of a massive conflict.

Bertus, from the position of defending the Empire, couldn't let the Demon King be released into the world without restraint.

Listening quietly to the story, Ellen uttered a single word.

"I'll attend the Five Major Religions Conclave."

Without saying what she would talk about there.

"Can I… go see Reinhardt?"

As if that was all she had been thinking about, Ellen asked.

—---

Standing in front of Reinhardt, who was bound in chains, Ellen was surprised by the guilt that welled up from deep within her chest.

She played a crucial role in capturing the Demon King who threatened humanity.

It was a great deed that would be remembered in history, no matter who heard about it.

But when she saw the deflated Reinhardt, what Ellen felt was not the exhilaration or ecstasy of revenge.

A sense of guilt gnawed at her from deep within her heart.

It was me.

It was me who did this to Reinhardt.

I was the one who reduced Reinhardt to this state.

"…"

Ellen hadn't expected him to receive good treatment, but seeing him with her own eyes was a different matter.

Her fingertips trembled and her breath caught in her throat as she looked at the miserable sight before her.

It felt as if someone was squeezing her heart.

Struggling, Reinhardt lifted his head and stared at Ellen standing outside the iron

bars.

Reinhardt, gagged and unable to speak, tried to focus on Ellen, who seemed blurry to his exhausted or perhaps resigned eyes.

Eventually, tears welled up in Reinhardt's unfocused eyes as he seemed to recognize Ellen. This sight made Ellen want to tear her heart out.

"…"

Were those tears fake too?

No, that couldn't be.

Absolutely not.

Ellen trembled as she gripped the iron bars, looking at Reinhardt inside the prison.

What have I done?

What have I done?

She wanted to say sorry, but she knew she had no right to say such words, so she could only force a smile.

The son of the Demon King who killed her brother.

All the lies he had told so far.

The countless things he had done without telling anyone.

All of that disappeared when she saw Reinhardt's broken state.

It was my fault.

I ruined everything.

I should have trusted him more.

At least, I should have listened to his side of the story.

But I didn't.

Overwhelmed by fear and terror, and caught up in betrayal and suspicion.

I didn't even listen to his story.

If I had, if I had given him a chance to speak for himself.

No, actually, he did speak.

Though he spoke playfully, his words at the time could have been an attempt to alleviate his inner frustration and depression.

If only I had taken his words a little more seriously back then.

If I hadn't dismissed them as frivolous and unpleasant jokes.

Things might not have turned out like this.

I didn't trust Reinhardt.

And so.

Everything fell apart.

"It's all… all… my fault…"

Saviolin Turner watched as Ellen, shaking and sobbing, broke down.

Reinhardt, his head bowed and gagged, couldn't say a word.

But still, Reinhardt shook his head with difficulty.

As if to say, it wasn't her fault.

Seeing this, Ellen could only tremble and cry even harder.

Saviolin Turner silently observed.

Ellen Artorius, who had essentially captured the Demon King herself, collapsed upon

seeing the captured Demon King.

Olivia Lanze declared that she would save Reinhardt.

He had won the hearts of very important figures, and so Reinhardt still had a chance to survive even after being revealed as the Demon King.

If the Demon King himself was the master of the sacred artifact and had the support of Olivia and Ellen, then he could survive through political means rather than through war.

No, it wasn't just that.

It might even be possible for him to break away half of humanity and bring them under his own influence.

Being exposed might actually make such a thing possible.

Was this also part of the Demon King's scheme?

Saviolin Turner looked at the Demon King beyond the weeping Ellen.

As if to say, it's not your fault, don't cry, the Demon King shook his head.

Could that pained gesture be a lie?

Gradually, in Saviolin Turner's heart.

Dark clouds of doubt and suspicion began to rise.

Chapter 444

Somewhere in an alley of the Imperial City.

"Epinhauser, why don't you follow the Order's decision?"

"…"

Epinhauser listened as a woman in a black robe leaned against the wall and spoke quietly.

"The Council is almost certainly in possession of the Akasha. They told you to track it down through Lord of Wednesday."

"We still don't know exactly what the Akasha is."

At Epinhauser's short response, the woman in the black robe gently tapped her white finger.

"Shouldn't we figure out what the Akasha is after we secure it?"

"If we mess with the Lord of Wednesday, the Council might sense the danger and use the Akasha."

"…"

Originally, the Black Order's objective was not to secure the Akasha, but the annihilation of Cantus Magna. After the battle at the Tomb of the Lich, the Council cut off contact with the Black Order.

This meant that maintaining an alliance was no longer possible.

It was certain that they had chosen the right time to sever ties, as their goal had already been achieved.

It wasn't particularly unreasonable. Alliances tended to last only as long as their interests aligned.

However, now the Order sought to address a new threat called the Akasha.

The only clue at the moment was Lucinil, who had infiltrated the Temple as a first-year student.

But Epinhauser, an insider at the Temple, was ignoring the Order's decision to track Lucinil and find the whereabouts of the Akasha.

"Epinhauser, I hope you haven't taken a liking to the Demon King's side."

That's why the Order couldn't help but doubt the silent Epinhauser's intentions.

"The Order completely agreed with your opinion that the Demon King is essential for the unity and maintenance of the Empire. That's why we spared the Demon King's life."

"…"

"But that only applies when the Demon King is weak and has minimal power. Your opinion was correct then, but the situation has changed now."

Epinhauser remained silent.

"The Demon King will die soon. No, if he survives like this, the problem will only grow."

"The Demon King can no longer be weak, can cause numerous political divisions in the Empire, and can wield powerful forces at his whim."

"On top of that, he has the Akasha."

"The Demon King is already a sign of a massive division, and he could become the starting point for the collapse of the Empire."

"We'll leave the Demon King to die, and if he survives, the Order will intervene."

"So, Epinhauser, focus on securing the Akasha, the most significant threat at this point. The only lead we have right now is the Lord of Wednesday."

"The Order exists for the continuity of the Empire and the sake of humanity. Have

you forgotten what's most important?"

At the words of the woman in the black robe, Epinhauser lowered his head.

"I haven't forgotten."

"Then why don't you follow the Order's decision?"

The Black Order.

They exist to maintain order.

Order for the Empire and humanity.

They undertake dirty tasks to support the Empire behind the scenes, sometimes committing heinous acts that are socially unacceptable in order to uphold the Empire.

That's why collaborating with the Demon King for the sake of the Empire was one of the Order's contradictory endeavors.

The Demon King is undoubtedly a great threat to the Empire.

However, an overly weak Demon King could be useful.

After the Great Demon War, the Empire showed signs of division, and they needed such an abstract enemy.

To humanity, it appeared another massive dark cloud loomed, but in reality, the Demon King had simply weakened.

The Order chose to observe the Demon King from a distance rather than eliminate him. It was most accurate to view the extent of the Demon King's power from the standpoint of an ally.

According to the reports sent by Epinhauser over time, it was confirmed that the Demon King did not harbor any particular hostility or malice towards humanity.

A Demon King who did not oppose humanity, but who certainly existed.

Such a Demon King was the most necessary existence for both humanity and the empire.

However, the atmosphere started to become strange as the Demon King secured a sacred relic.

The story changed when Cantus Magna shared a secret with a member of his him.

The Demon King's usefulness had vanished.

To be precise, the Demon King's existence had already become too dangerous in and of itself.

Reinhardt was a weak Demon King, which made him an existence suitable for the Order's taste.

Whenever the sense of crisis in the empire's division intensified, his appearance in a suitable place caused frightened humans to cling tightly to one another.

The Order knew that the Demon King did not harbor great animosity towards humanity and was rather seeking coexistence, and that he did not have much enthusiasm for the reconstruction of the demon world.

Despite such intentions, the Demon King was a champion chosen by the gods, and now his servants possessed the highly dangerous artifact called Akasha. Even a faction called the Demon God Cult, which followed the Demon King, had emerged.

The Order knew that the Demon King was a harmless existence, but they did not approach the situation with such a concept or perspective.

The Demon King had become too dangerous a symbol simply by existing.

So now, he must be removed.

Akasha is dangerous.

So, it must be secured.

The first of the two tasks would be taken care of by the empire.

Thus, the Order needed to focus on the second task, securing Akasha.

Epinhauser, one of the most crucial personnel within the temple, was not listening.

"One should approach a bomb, which can destroy the world from one end to another if touched recklessly, with great caution."

Epinhauser's words had a point.

If one were to forcefully find out the location of Akasha by torturing or detaining the Lord of Wednesday, the Council might make a radical choice.

"Remember, Epinhauser, as time passes, there is nothing good for us."

"I'll keep that in mind."

With a swish, the woman in a black robe disappeared, and Epinhauser stepped back onto the main road and headed for the temple.

As always, the overly emotionless Epinhauser wore neat attire and made his way to the temple.

Morality and intention are irrelevant to one's existence.

Eliminating the threat to the empire and promoting the empire's revival.

That was the purpose and intention of the Order, even if it was not that of the empire.

The Black Order, which volunteered to be the pillar supporting the empire from the shadows, exists for him. There were even lower-ranking members who did not know the true intentions of the Black Order.

Receiving orders and carrying them out, there were those who desired only the power given to them by the Order in return for executing the commands, like flies.

But Epinhauser was not one of those flies.

Crossing the temple gate, Epinhauser walked through the still chaotic temple corridor.

The Demon King himself, as well as his own forces, should have been weak and small in scale.

The reason the Order cooperated with the Demon King was to closely observe his growth and deal with him when he crossed the line.

Now, that line had been crossed.

The empire would handle the Demon King's life, so the Order needed to deal with Akasha.

Riding the tram towards the Royal Class dormitory, Epinhauser called out to Lucinil, a quiet first-year student.

The Lord of Wednesday.

A silver-haired child.

Epinhauser sometimes had such thoughts.

The forces of the Demon King, like the Demon King himself, seemed to consist of somewhat foolish fellows.

“…What's the matter?"

Lucinil, still at the temple to monitor its internal affairs, did not have a good expression given the situation. She and Epinhauser were the only points of contact between the Council and the Order.

Thus, Lucinil was tense.

She would have to respond if Epinhauser were to take an aggressive stance.

Unable to leave the temple because of his exposed situation, Lucinil had to stay there to report on Valier's imprisonment.

"Akasha, do you possess it?"

"…”

At Epinhauser's question, Lucinil remained silent, slowly retreating.

"What is Akasha?"

"…"

"With Akasha, what do you plan to do?"

Epinhauser did not approach Lucinil but simply asked from his position.

"Will you become our ally?"

Lucinil asked an entirely different question. Epinhauser shook his head in response.

"No, we can no longer be your allies, regardless of the Akasha issue."

Though it was unnecessary to say, Epinhauser felt compelled to do so.

"Then, there is no reason for me to tell you."

"The Order instructed me to use force to find out Akasha's whereabouts from you."

“…Do you think that's possible?"

The Lord of Wednesday.

An old vampire. Lucinil looked at Epinhauser with a gaze full of hostility.

"I don't think it's necessarily impossible."

In contrast to the wary Lucinil, Epinhauser simply gazed at her.

"However, this is the will of the Order."

“…What?"

At Epinhauser's unexpected remark, Lucinil's eyes widened.

The Black Order was a group intent on performing acts of good through evil means.

Their definition of good was not absolute but referred to the good and justice solely for humanity.

However, Epinhauser had seen it.

Though not for a long time.

A mere boy with a filthy temperament.

He had seen the boy grit his teeth and grow without possessing anything.

He had seen him struggle not to break within petty justice and petty convictions.

He had known the boy to be the Demon King and saw that he did not hate humanity despite his experiences.

On the contrary, he had witnessed his love for humans and his attempts to save them at times.

Though he had not observed this from the sidelines.

As a teacher, he had watched the growth of the Demon King.

He had seen a person not much different from an ordinary human, persistently climbing upwards, accomplishing the tasks he believed in.

The Order was a group that performed good through evil means.

It was an organization that had to work in the shadows for the sake of the empire, carrying out cursed tasks without recognition from anyone.

Therefore, pride was of utmost importance to the Order's operatives.

They had no choice but to possess pride and convictions strong enough to carry out irrational acts of evil.

However.

A being that should rightfully hate humanity.

Epinhauser had seen a being, for whom not hating humanity should have been physically and logically impossible, love humanity more than anyone else.

It was an impossible feat.

The Demon King, who had achieved what should have been impossible.

How strong were the pride and convictions of such a being?

Epinhauser could not fathom it.

A being that did not hate humanity was burdened with hatred and sentenced to death.

Unable to achieve anything at all.

Without receiving anyone's sympathy, nor the understanding of those they loved.

His pride, convictions, and dreams remained unknown to anyone.

Doomed to die bearing the stigma of a traitor and a deceiver.

A world where such pride must be broken.

A world where such convictions must be insulted.

If that is a world where such beings must die miserably without accomplishing anything,

What is pride and what are convictions?

If the world's greatest pride and convictions must be destroyed,

What value do they hold, and

What meaning is there in that world?

Having lived his entire life solely by his convictions and pride,

If the one who sought to act on a pride even greater than his own, in the name of

forgiveness and reconciliation rather than evil, must die in such a manner,

If he must die in infamy and disgrace without receiving anyone's understanding,

If that is the world,

If that is the will of the gods,

Then even the gods

And the world,

Are worthless.

Someone's misunderstanding leads them to hate the boy.

Someone's misunderstanding leads them to be moved by the boy.

"Although the Order may not be on your side, I believe I can be on your side."

And so, Epinhauserer said as much.

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Due to the action of Olivia Lanze, the Empire found itself unable to act against the Demon King.

Any punishment for the Demon King would first have to be discussed with the Five Holy Orders.

Ultimately, the 'stalling tactic' Olivia Lanze intended was a great success.

And as Olivia had spoken, rumors spread rapidly throughout the Empire.

The Demon King had been captured.

Not long ago, Reinhardt, known to have been chosen by the Alsbringer, was the Demon King himself.

Rumors that the Demon King had infiltrated among the humans.

And the truth that the Demon King had been chosen by the Alsbringer.

These brought shock and confusion.

Though the capture of the Demon King should be a relief, the fact that the gods knew about it and bestowed a sacred artifact upon him implied the gods intended it.

Moreover, that sacred artifact now held the greatest value to humanity.

The sword of the hero who had slain the father is now wielded by the son.

What was Als planning?

Was the God of War living up to their name and desiring a great war?

What did the gods want?

Had the gods abandoned them?

Why had they chosen the Demon King of the demon race, rather than humanity?

Despite the capture of the Demon King, people felt confusion and fear.

And then,

At the temple,

During breakfast time,

"So, you knew about it, didn't you?"

Liana de Grantz said as she looked at Harriet.

Harriet, like a sinner, bowed her head in front of Liana, unable to say a word.

Ellen and Harriet had been acting strange lately.

As if Liana could now understand the meaning behind their strange behavior, she nodded quietly.

The Demon King who had killed Duke Grantz was Reinhardt.

And he had even attended the funeral.

Liana heard that fact and slowly nodded.

"Harriet, let's talk later."

"Huh? Ah… Yeah……”

Harriet quietly watched as the tip of the fork held by Liana turned bright red.

Chapter 445

The news that Reinhardt was the Demon King had thrown the entire Imperial Capital into chaos, but the most confusion, naturally, was at the Temple.

Once the students of the Temple learned the cause of the recent unrest, their faces turned pale with fear.

They had thought the Temple was the safest place after the Imperial Palace, but the Demon King himself had been attending the Temple.

And now, he was discovered and imprisoned.

It was only natural that there were many students who, amidst the chaos and fear, were hurriedly packing their belongings to leave the Temple.

In the midst of the confused Temple, there was the Royal Class.

"No… What went wrong? Even if it's Reinhardt, that guy…"

Erich de Lafaeri stared blankly, shaking his head in disbelief.

The faces of the other students were also drained of color.

The atmosphere had been strange, and Reinhardt had been suspiciously absent. When they discovered the truth, it was far bigger than they had imagined.

Even though they weren't close friends, they had shared the same roof with the Demon King.

Regardless of their shock, they simply couldn't believe it.

Reinhardt was a person with a filthy temper, somewhat sinister, and now chosen by a sacred artifact, making him seem to be on another level.

That Reinhardt was the Demon King.

"What on… what on earth…"

Heinrich von Schwarz was also in disbelief.

"Isn't there some kind of misunderstanding? This… can this be true?"

It was Kono Lint who spoke.

"…"

Cayer, who had picked a fight with Reinhardt during their first year, was trembling.

"Isn't there some sort of mistake?"

Ludwig was discussing the situation with the students of Class B.

"No, Reinhardt couldn't have done it. He's human, after all."

"Maybe he used some kind of transformation magic…"

At Delfin's words, Ludwig furrowed his brow and shook his head.

"But how did he get into the Temple?"

Ranian Sesor's question made Christina tilt her head.

"I don't know, maybe there's some kind of magic that allowed him to do that. He is the Demon King after all… But it's still hard to understand…"

Class B was also shocked and confused by the news that Reinhardt was the Demon King.

Scarlett walked past her classmates who were discussing the matter. She had found out earlier than them, but she too couldn't accept the current situation.

"So, everything related to the Demon King up until now was… Reinhardt's doing?"

The massacre of the Knights Templar.

The attack on Rajeurn.

And even the resurgence of the Demon God Cult.

Upon hearing that all these events were orchestrated by Reinhardt, everyone was stunned.

Reinhardt, whom they thought was just an outstanding classmate, turned out to be the Demon King who even committed civilian massacres.

Everyone could only feel fear and betrayal.

"Why… why did Reinhardt…?"

At the funeral of the Duke of Grantz, Ludwig had seen Reinhardt.

Was his somber expression then all an act?

In reality, had he killed his friend's parents under his own orders and even attended the funeral?

Why did he have to do it?

Just for despair?

Ludwig could not understand the connection between all these events.

As they continued to discuss the matter, something sinister began to emerge.

Students who were chatting in the hall soon noticed a dark, ominous presence creeping up from somewhere in the corridor.

"Wh-what is that…?"

The identity of the shadow spreading throughout the corridor was unknown. All students were startled and stood up from their seats.

A sinister and dark energy, as if trying to consume the world, seemed to surge from somewhere.

While everyone was frozen in place, only Ludwig made his way towards the corridor.

An unidentified black energy blanketed the entire hallway.

Although he could not be certain, Ludwig deduced that it came from Dormitory B-1 at the very end of the corridor.

Soon, he realized that the energy was emanating from Charlotte's room.

Something had happened to Charlotte.

"Charlotte!"

Without hesitation, Ludwig pushed through the dark energy and flung open Charlotte's door.

-Thunk!

The door was not locked.

"Ch… Charlotte…?"

In the middle of the dormitory room,

Charlotte, her body shrouded in black energy, was sitting motionless on her bed.

Not only Ludwig, but other students as well, could see that Charlotte was engulfed in this ominous energy.

Sitting blankly on the bed, Charlotte gazed at her classmates, including Ludwig, through her red demonic eyes.

"Leave…"

In a voice barely above a whisper,

"Leave me be…"

Charlotte de Gardias spoke those words.

The students at the temple became aware of Charlotte's condition.

Charlotte was promptly escorted to the royal palace by the royal family.

The students did not know exactly what it was, whether it was Charlotte's supernatural powers that had been kept secret until now, or something else entirely.

Charlotte had been kidnapped by the Demon King, and she had spent considerable time in close proximity to the Demon King's successor.

Rumors circulated amongst the students that the princess had received a curse similar to that of the Demon King.

Rumors beget rumors, creating fabricated truths.

Technically, Charlotte de Gardias, the primary victim of the Demon King, was now under a completely different cloud of suspicion.

Could it be that the First Princess was actually an accomplice of the Demon King?

Her safe escape from the Demon King's castle was suspicious to begin with.

And it just so happened that her closest classmate was the Demon King's son.

It could all be part of a plan, with the First Princess not being a victim but a willing accomplice.

Most people did not know that Charlotte and Ellen played a crucial role in tracking down the Demon King's trail, and even if they did, it wouldn't have made a difference.

People tend to draw conclusions and fit circumstances accordingly.

Suspicious events intertwine and create non-existent truths.

The First Princess is suspicious.

The spreading rumors were already trying to create new truths and find their next

target.

The First Princess was too high-ranking to be sacrificed to such rumors.

However, it was uncertain how long her status would protect the First Princess.

Holy Knight Order Headquarters, Conference Room.

Due to an urgent religious matter, people who would not normally gather in the conference room were all present.

From the Holy Knight Order's leader, Eleion Bolton, to the Popes of the Five Great Religions– Tu'an, Mencis, Als, Riter, and Shal'am – as well as the two Champions, Olivia Lanze and Ellen Artorius, were all in attendance.

Representatives of each religious order, those representing the combined forces of those orders, and the Champions chosen by the gods.

It was rare for these individuals to gather in one place, and among them, Olivia and Ellen sat side by side at the highest seats.

Such is the authority of the Champions of the Gods.

Even if, like Ellen, they are not actual believers, Champions possess immense religious authority and symbolism in and of themselves. Therefore, both Olivia, who was originally a believer and a priestess, and Ellen, received precedence over the Popes.

However, silence enveloped the conference room.

For generations, the gods of the Five Great Religions had been perceived as gods for humanity.

For they had always granted relics only to humans.

The demon race, under the name of the Demon Gods, separated themselves from the rest, claiming to have their own faith.

But the War God Als chose the Demon King.

The War God, who had once bestowed a relic upon a hero to slay the Demon King, had now strangely chosen the son of the slain Demon King.

That was why the high priests could not speak hastily.

They couldn't understand what was happening.

Olivia was the first to speak.

"The choice of the gods is correct. Therefore, I believe there must be some intention behind Als choosing the Demon King. That intention may be beyond our understanding, but I believe this matter will eventually lead to great righteousness and justice."

Olivia had no interest in the will of the gods, but pretending otherwise was easy for her.

The reason the Demon King was chosen must be due to an intention too great for us to understand; thus, it is ultimately a long-term and absolute good.

Therefore, Olivia's argument was that they should accept the existence of the Demon King.

The high priest of the Tu'an order reacted to Olivia's words.

"Champion. The demons have always been the enemies of mankind, and the abominable Demon King is undoubtedly the ultimate enemy of mankind, possessing an incomprehensible and immense power. Thus, there is a possibility that the relic has been negatively influenced by that unfathomable power."

"Doubting the sanctity of the relic is doubting the sanctity of the gods. Are you now questioning the choice of the gods?"

The high priest of the Als order refuted the words of the Tu'an order's high priest.

To claim that the Demon King had negatively influenced Als's relic and stolen it was to deny not only the Als order but also the War God's will.

That's why the Als order had no choice but to react sensitively.

Olivia faintly smiled at the high priest of the Als order's statement.

In reality, it was not Olivia, but the Als order that had to absolutely defend Reinhardt.

Due to the hero using the Alsbringer to defeat the Demon King, the Als order currently had the most followers among the Five Great Religions.

In such a situation, the followers and priests of the Als order were the most shaken.

Therefore, it was a situation where they were most reluctant to have Als's authority questioned or doubted.

If they were to affirm the Demon King, they had to do so wholeheartedly, and if they were to deny the Demon King, they had to do so extremely.

“…That is not what I meant. I just wanted to say that since we do not know what power the Demon King possesses or what kind of nefarious acts he can commit, it is premature to wholeheartedly accept him."

At the words of the Tu'an order's high priest, everyone slowly nodded their heads.

They were aware that the situation was escalating into a massive religious conflict, and that a huge conflict had already begun. The decision made here could very well become the spark for a massive war.

That's why they all understood that making hasty decisions would put everyone at risk.

Recklessly denying the Demon King would shake the foundation of faith in the Five Great Religions.

Recklessly accepting the Demon King could lead to a war between the Empire and the Five Great Religions.

Thus, the prevailing judgment was that they had no choice but to observe the situation for now.

And everyone was wary of Olivia Lanze.

Although she speaks in accordance with the situation and doctrine, Olivia does not hide the fact that she is entirely on the side of the Demon King.

The champion of Tu’an is a stubborn fool, trying to wage war.

That's why everyone had to grit their teeth whenever Olivia opened her mouth.

And the high priest of the Tu'an Order was the most affected by this.

The saint, once a promising leader of the next generation of the Tu'an Order, or the future commander of the Holy Knights, had become an extremist.

Why did Tu'an have to choose someone like that…

Inevitably, such thoughts flooded their minds.

"The high priest of the Tu'an Order seems to be a little pale."

Naturally, Olivia was not one to miss that.

She had already explained it to Eleion Bolton, but there was still one fact that the other popes present did not know.

"Well, I'd like to share an interesting fact with you."

Olivia summons Tiamata with a smirk.

"Actually, I share Tiamata with the Demon King."

"What?!"

There was only one order that must advocate for the existence of the Demon King.

The Als Order.

"So, in this great battle of Tu'an, there are not one, but two champions."

And now, the Tu'an Order had been added as well.

Ellen and Eleion Bolton, who already knew the truth, remained silent.

But the high priests of the Five Great Religions could only be appalled.

The Demon King had not only been chosen by Als but by Tu'an as well. Everyone had no choice but to react with disbelief.

However, they couldn't prove it conclusively, and there was a chance that Olivia was lying just to support the Demon King's side.

"If you doubt my words, you can ask the champion of Mencis."

Olivia gestured to Ellen with her chin.

The sister of the hero and the only person with the authority to stop Olivia's misdeeds.

Everyone looked at Ellen Artorious, as if hoping she would deny it.

"It's true."

Ellen had no intention of lying.

"Oh, gods…"

One of the high priests let out an ambiguous exclamation, neither cursing nor praising the gods.

Not only the Als Order but also the Tu'an Order.

The high priest of the Tu'an Order was going mad with frustration.

The champion was a lunatic siding with the Demon King, and on top of that, even choosing the Demon King.

"Since I became the champion of Tu'an last year, I was the first to be chosen, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

The high priest of the Tu'an Order felt like his own house had burned down while he was looking at someone else's.

Not one, but two.

They did not know that Ellen currently possessed Lapelt, the relic of Shal'am.

Thus, the Demon King now held two relics, making him the most powerful religious symbol at the moment.

It was already a headache with one, but now there were two.

It was difficult to claim that they had intercepted Alsbringer with some scheme, let alone intercepting two relics. It would be tantamount to admitting the incompetence of the gods themselves.

That was fundamentally impossible.

So, could they accept the existence of the Demon King?

Psychologically, it would be impossible for most of the crowd, as well as many within the Orders who could not understand it.

It could lead to a rift not only with the Empire but also among the religious people gathered under the name of the Holy Knights.

In the long run, the Tu'an and Als Orders could be branded as no different from the worship of the Demon King.

In the long run, the demise of the religious order itself; in the short run, a religious war.

A calamity.

Or perhaps an even greater calamity.

They were faced with the worst possible choices, and no matter what they chose, disaster was the only outcome.

"First of all, we can all agree that it's appropriate for us to make a decision regarding the Demon King's issue, right?"

At Olivia's natural remark, not only the Holy Knights' commander but also the five

High Priests of the Divine Faith were on the verge of losing their minds.

If the Demon King fell into their hands, she would claim his innocence through a fair trial, and she made no effort to conceal her intention to eventually release him safely.

However, they could not disagree that this issue must be resolved in the hands of the five religious orders.

This was a matter concerning the authority of the Divine Faith.

The high priests of the five religious orders looked at Ellen, who had a similar right to speak as Olivia.

Hoping that at least she would be reasonable.

Desperately wishing that she would somehow put a brake on the crazy champion of Tu’an's statement.

"Regarding Rein… no, regarding the Demon King…”

Ellen Artorius opened her mouth.

"I believe that we should give him a chance to explain everything that has happened so far."

This one was not to be underestimated either.

Chapter 446

Olivia's claim that the Demon King must be handed over to the Five Great Holy Orders.

Ellen's claim that the Demon King should be given a chance to explain himself.

While these two arguments seemed similar, they were different. For starters, Ellen didn't argue that the Demon King must be brought in.

At the very least, they should give the Demon King a chance to explain what he had been up to so far, and whether or not his actions were intended to harm humanity.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the high priests of the Five Great Divine Orders welcomed Ellen's more moderate proposal over Olivia's extreme one.

"Let's hold something like a public hearing… is that the idea?"

Bertus, who had heard the result of the high priests' meeting, wore a stern expression.

He didn't know what that would mean.

"Well, at least it's better than the absurd demand to hand over the Demon King…"

It wasn't as crazy as Olivia Lanze's ultimatum to either hand over the Demon King or go to war.

"I don't know what difference this will make, but if we can do this much and manage to keep the Holy Orders quiet for now…"

Whether it was a public trial or a public hearing, they couldn't be sure of the nature of the event, but it would give them some ground to oppose Olivia Lanze's outrageous demands.

They had already given you everything you were entitled to during the last public hearing, so don't make any more excessive demands.

Questioning the Demon King in a public place.

While it wasn't as extreme a choice as Olivia's, Bertus bit his lip.

If Ellen Artorius also took the Demon King's side, the situation would spiral out of control.

Tiamata, Alsbringer, Lament.

If all three divine artifacts sided with the Demon King, there would be no reason for the Five Great Religions not to join him. Denying those three would be tantamount to destroying the very foundation of their faith.

Of course, the high-ranking members of the Holy Orders probably didn't want to support the Demon King. It was more like a desperate move made with tears in their eyes.

If the entire Five Great Religions were to support the Demon King, the world would literally fall apart.

"What about Charlotte?"

"She is currently in isolation at the Spring Palace."

Bertus sighed.

Charlotte's worsening condition was another serious concern for him.

They had captured the Demon King.

All their problems should have been resolved, but for some reason, the situation seemed to only get more complicated.

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The Five Great Religions and the Empire would hold a public hearing for the Demon King.

What kind of conspiracy had he been involved in so far? What process led to his selection by the divine artifacts, and was there truly no foul play involved?

Whether the Demon King was truly an evil being.

They would question the Demon King on these matters and determine his punishment based on their mutual agreement.

Such news spread far and wide.

Of course, the public hearing wasn't open for civilians to attend.

Only those with the authority to speak on the matter or the right to witness it were granted permission.

Emperor Nelliod de Gardias of the Empire.

First Prince Bertus de Gardias.

High Priests from each of the Five Great Religions.

Holy Knight Commander Eleion Bolton.

Champion of Tu'an, Olivia Lanze.

Champion of Mencis, Ellen Artorius.

Shanafel for security and escort, along with the Royal Mage Corps.

Holy knights from the Five Great Religions.

In addition to this, there was Scarlett, an individual with immunity capabilities, to prepare for the possibility that the Demon King might use his Word Magic to cause mischief.

Unable to show herself outside, Charlotte could not attend.

The interrogation was decided to be held within the main temple building.

The interrogation didn't start immediately. In anticipation of unforeseen circumstances, numerous barriers and magical measures were implemented within the temple, which had already passed safety verification.

The outcome of this interrogation would determine whether the five major religions and the empire would become hostile or maintain a precarious peace.

Two days later.

The public interrogation of the Demon King began.

"…"

From a distance, Harriet looked at the main temple building.

Harriet could not attend the public interrogation.

Whether it was right or wrong, she could not know.

Perhaps it was not right, thought Harriet de Saint-Owan.

But she decided to do it.

She decided to trust.

In that desperation.

In that earnestness.

In the end, Harriet could not deny it.

So.

She intended to do what she had to do.

If she had to betray everything she knew for the sake of trusting a single person.

She decided to do so.

—---

"Two days later… is that correct?"

"That's what the Lord of Wednesday said."

Eleris nodded to Antirianus' words.

"It seems like the right time. If a situation arises, we'll proceed as planned."

"…"

"Are you now sufficiently familiar with the use of Akasha?"

"…Yes."

Eleris nodded silently.

The preparations to use the tool of creation for destruction were complete.

Eleris had finished the preparations.

Valier would resent her.

There was no other choice but to bear resentment.

Because of this, the Demon King would become a symbol of hatred and loathing for all beings.

Only to survive.

Only to live.

Was it truly right to accept all that hatred and loathing just for the sake of survival?

Would it be acceptable to throw someone into such a situation to avoid death?

Would Valier really be happy to survive?

Eleris knew the answer.

He wouldn't be.

However.

To save the child she had endangered, the last descendant.

Eleris decided to destroy the world.

Living wickedly, living hypocritically.

In the end, she chose to open the path of absolute evil, which was neither hypocrisy nor wickedness.

—---

In an ambiguous time where everyone felt an inexplicable sense of unease, two days passed.

In front of the temporary detention facility where the Demon King was held, Shanafel, the Royal Mage Corps, and numerous Holy Knights were already stationed.

From the Empire's perspective, it was a place to find common ground with the five major religions. The five major religions sought to determine whether the Demon King's existence was truly legitimate.

Numerous people were prepared to escort the Demon King to the main temple building.

Even in such circumstances, there were onlookers.

Students who wanted to catch a glimpse of the spectacle from a distance, near the detention cell where the Demon King was certainly confined.

Standing beside the Demon King, who was gagged, were Saviolin Turner and Scarlett, prepared to respond to any emergency situation.

These elites, who could be considered the best of humanity, were gathered to escort the Demon King.

The assembled group consisted of only the finest and most powerful individuals of humanity, so much so that it could be said that even if the previous Demon King Valier returned to life, he would not be able to rescue his son in such a situation.

Everyone held their breath, gazing at the Demon King from afar.

Not long after being known as a hero, the man revealed himself to be the Demon

King in human form.

Could that really be the Demon King?

Appearances can sometimes be everything, and so people could only sense the human presence from the Demon King in human form.

Could something be wrong?

Many who didn't know the full story couldn't help but think so.

Perhaps there was some kind of conspiracy, something we couldn't know.

Could they be trying to kill a perfectly fine hero?

Some inevitably reached that conclusion.

Regardless of people's suspicions, the escort party solemnly brought the Demon King to the main hall.

People were already waiting in the prepared seats in the main hall, and the Demon King sat in a wooden chair placed in the middle of the open space.

Not a throne, nor an excessively shabby chair, but an ordinary chair one could find anywhere, even in a temple classroom.

Next to the one who had sat as a student and now sat as the Demon King, Scarlett and Saviolin Turner stood.

Olivia watched this scene with a clenched fist.

Those gathered for the interrogation.

And those deployed for security.

Surrounded by people, the Demon King simply sat quietly in the chair.

Reinhardt, who was once believed to be a hero without a doubt and had been the fiancé of the princess.

But now, he was the Demon King, and the Emperor watched him closely, speaking.

"Remove the gag."

At that command, Scarlett carefully removed the gag from Reinhardt's mouth.

"From now on, we shall grant the Demon King a final chance to explain himself."

"How you became the owner of two divine artifacts."

"What is the mysterious magical tool, Akasha, that can make one a god? What happened to it?"

"What have you been hoping for until now?"

"If your desire for peace was sincere, how can you prove it?"

"This is your last chance."

"Young Demon King."

"Explain everything."

The Demon King, Reinhardt, in handcuffs, sat in the chair, quietly looking around.

Olivia Lanze.

Ellen Artorius.

Bertus de Gardias.

He stared at each of their faces slowly.

The Demon King seemed to sense something.

Being cornered, and more cornered.

As if feeling an inevitable fate he could no longer resist.

His expression became as if he had realized something.

"That doesn't matter anymore."

He clicked his tongue.

"You won't believe me anyway."

In this situation, his arrogant attitude made everyone's already serious expressions even more severe.

Where had the look of giving up everything gone?

Still gloomy and dark, the arrogant Demon King spoke.

"You'll think that I can only hate humans because I wanted to save you."

"You won't believe me if I say I did all this because I wanted peace."

"You killed my father, Valier, and destroyed Darkland. Of course, you think I'm a being that can only hate humans."

"With that mindset, you can't understand my intention to love humans and save everyone."

"I don't particularly hate humans."

"And being at the temple, I simply enjoyed it."

"I wanted to help the kids when they were in danger."

"I wanted to comfort them when they were sad."

"Two divine artifacts? Want me to tell you something interesting?"

"Alsbringer chooses only those who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the world."

"I won't bother telling you why I know something that even the Pope of the Als Order doesn't know since you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Anyway, I am prepared to die for you all, but you probably won't believe that. Yeah, of course. It's unbelievable."

"So, I won't talk about such an insignificant truth that you won't even believe."

"Instead, I'll start telling you a story that you'll find believable."

"Rather than telling you the truth that you can't believe, no matter how much I explain, I think it's better to tell you about the future."

"I told you that my followers might try to destroy the world with Akasha in order to save me, so you should either kill me as quickly as possible or set me free, but you did neither."

"So now, the worst thing I've been trying to prevent is about to happen."

The Demon King raises his head.

"Soon, all the warp gates on the continent will be transformed into dimensional gates connected to another world."

"And monsters from that world will pour out and destroy your world."

The Demon King, with his ominous gaze, declares as if cursing.

"So, be prepared."

Everyone held their breath at the Demon King's gaze.

—---

Temple Royal Academy, Class 2-B dormitory.

-Bang!

Startled by the sudden appearance of someone running into the hallway, Ludwig turns his head.

"Uh… Scarlett?"

"Gasp… Huff…"

Scarlett, her red hair drenched in cold sweat, was panting as she looked at Ludwig.

As if something terrible had happened.

Ludwig felt the same way.

"Wait, aren't you supposed to be there now? You shouldn't be here."

Scarlett was supposed to be by the Demon King's side to control his Supernatural powers, and the interrogation was still ongoing.

But here she was, drenched in sweat and in her pajamas, running out into the hallway.

"No, I saw you leave earlier…?"

Ludwig had definitely seen Scarlett, with a determined expression, leaving the dormitory. But now she was here.

Hearing that, Scarlett turned pale and shook her head.

"It wasn't… it wasn't me…"

"What?"

"Someone… knocked me out and… disguised themselves as me…"

Now, someone other than Scarlett was closest to the Demon King.

—---

Reinhardt's interrogation room, where he had been confined, now had fewer guards due to the reduced forces.

The Demon King they had to monitor had been moved, and they had already obtained all the information they could from his subordinates who had been imprisoned with him.

The Archmage and Swordmasters had left, and Temple security, not Shanafel's knights, were guarding the place.

And right now, all the forces inside the prison were asleep, under the sleeping spell

of the mage.

-Step by step

Two people enter the underground dungeon.

The iron bars open, and the white-haired woman sees the two people standing before her.

Loyar had never seen Ephinhauser and Lucinil before.

But she seemed to understand what their expressions meant.

"It's our only chance."

"…"

"Let's go save Valier."

Lucinil unlocks Loyar's shackles.

Struggling to get up, Loyar tries to move her stiff limbs. Although she had been imprisoned for a long time, she stretches a few times and takes a deep breath.

"There's something I'd like to ask."

Loyar looks back and forth between Ephinhauser and Lucinil as if either of them could answer.

"What happened to… the Rotary Club kids?"

Lucinil didn't know what Loyar was asking.

"Isn't it obvious what happened to those who were recognized as the Demon King's accomplices?"

Upon hearing Ephinhauser's words, Loyar slowly nodded.

"Adriana, who was once a temple student, seems to be under protection due to Ellen's request, but the rest have all been sentenced to death."

"Ah… I see…"

Loyar nodded again.

"Well, at least they can die without regrets."

The white-haired woman laughed.

With an expression that was anything but joyful.

—---

Right next to the Demon King, Saviolin Turner and Scarlett stood guard.

The arena fell silent at the shocking revelation of the Demon King's future foresight. In particular, Olivia stared at Reinhardt with wide eyes.

"The key to stopping the Gate incident is to destroy the Warp Gates. Once all the Warp Gates on the continent are demolished, the Gate incident will end."

As if sensing a terrible fate, the Demon King spoke with a conviction that left no room for doubt.

Bertus stared silently at the Demon King.

Had it been right to release him?

If this were part of his conspiracy, the Demon King would have had no reason to reveal the solution.

The Demon King was talking about an event that had not yet occurred.

Everyone was confused as to whether he caused the incident or if his claim of trying to save humanity was true.

Ellen stared quietly at Reinhardt.

Problems caused by her distrust of Reinhardt.

And if what Reinhardt said was true and such an event actually occurred,

The cause would lie with the Demon King and his subordinates.

And she would also bear the responsibility for her own distrust.

Bang!

The door burst open, and in rushed a Shanafel knight with a desperate expression.

His face was so pale that everyone couldn't help but be puzzled.

The Shanafel knight hurriedly approached the emperor and whispered something into his ear.

The Demon King watched the emperor's expression.

"Ah… It seems it has already begun."

As if he could tell what had happened just by looking at the change in the emperor's complexion, the Demon King laughed without a care.

"You should have trusted me…"

Grrrooooooaaaaarrrr

From very far away.

Distantly.

Everyone heard the cry of an unknown monster.

Everyone looked at the emperor, not the Demon King.

As if asking what he had heard.

"From the Warp Gate… Unidentifiable monsters… are appearing."

The Gate incident had begun.

But that was not the end.

"The sky… is strange…"

A pale-faced magician from the Royal Mage Corps, who had been keeping watch outside, entered and reported.

"Meteors… are falling…"

The sky opened, and meteors rained down toward the temple.

Chapter 447

-Boom! Crash! Bang!

A meteor shattered in the sky above the temple, creating a massive shockwave. Antirianus watched from a distance.

It was the middle of the day.

However, as if the sky had shattered like a mirror, meteors poured from the dark, empty cracks in the sky, falling towards the temple and breaking apart.

"Truly, a beautiful display of power…"

-Bang! Crash! Kaboom!

The activated barrier around the temple was so strong and thick that it could withstand meteors capable of reducing a small village to ashes.

Indeed, it was fitting to call this the second safest place on human land.

-Kyaaaaak!

-Gwoooooar!

-Kyaaaaak!

-Uaaaaaaah!

Antirianus gazed upon the countless monsters pouring out of the warp gate, which now emanated a fiery red glow instead of its usual blue.

These monsters of different shapes were killing people.

Imaginary dimensions.

A phenomenon where poorly created life forms from non-existent dimensions

struggle to exist in the existing world.

The worst disaster created by an imperfect Akasha.

Destruction begins.

"It's more than I imagined…”

Although he had high expectations, Antirianus seemed satisfied, watching the spectacle unfold.

-Kwoong!

Antirianus admired the magnificent sight of the falling meteors colliding with the temple.

—---

Silence still enveloped the Grand Library.

The Demon King had foreseen the disaster, but it had already begun.

However, the Demon King revealed the solution to the ongoing calamity, telling them how to resolve it.

"This disaster isn't limited to the Empire; it's happening all across the continent."

"The larger the gate, the more dangerous the monsters that come out. So, destroying the giant warp gates should be our priority."

"As you all know, the Empire has the highest number of warp gates on the continent."

"As time passes, more people will die if we don't act quickly."

"It's better to abandon small and medium-sized villages and outposts without proper troops or weapons, as they will face hordes of monsters even if they're not particularly strong."

"Most countries will lose their functionality, and only powerful states like the Empire and Kernstadt, along with their capitals and strategic cities, will continue to

function."

"Once safety is ensured in those places, we need to deal with the remaining gates one by one. That's how we'll resolve this situation."

"We must act quickly."

"Every minute we delay now could set humanity's reconstruction back by a year, or even a decade."

The Demon King did not blame the humans who caused this situation.

The damage was already done.

The elite forces of the Empire were gathered here.

The Empire had the most warp gates on the continent.

If they didn't act quickly, the scale of the disaster would turn the Empire to ashes. Meteors were pouring down to destroy the temple.

Everyone listened to the Demon King's words, looking pale.

If the Demon King had planned this to destroy humanity, he wouldn't have shared this information.

The truth of his words would be proven by destroying the warp gates.

The disaster had begun.

The scale of the damage would only grow as time passed, with no known cause or reason for the calamity.

Or could it be that the Demon King shared this information knowing that destruction was inevitable?

No, there was no reason for that.

If the Empire believed that this situation was only happening within their borders, they would face a world reduced to ashes in the future.

In a situation where all the warp gates had become inoperative, communication proved difficult.

There was no need to point out that humanity would suffer even greater damage as time went on, or that this catastrophe affected the entire continent.

Everyone present had a gut feeling.

Although the Demon King's minions may have orchestrated this, the Demon King himself probably did not want to welcome such a situation.

That is why he might be offering a solution to humanity.

The Emperor pondered this.

Even if nothing else could be trusted, they had to believe the Demon King's words about the disaster that had already occurred.

If the Demon King truly had humanity's best interests at heart, they could not kill him. He might know something else that they were not aware of.

However, they could not simply let him go either.

It was certain that something would happen, but if the Imperial Capital collapsed, the empire would come to an end.

In a situation where a catastrophe threatening the entire continent was suspected, the forces that could be allocated to the Demon King were limited.

"Turner, stay in position with the first unit."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Shanafel, all remaining forces, except the first unit, and the Royal Mage Corps, follow me."

The problem of the Demon King was indeed an issue, but right now, the Imperial Capital might evaporate at any moment.

If their elite forces were to stand by here to monitor the Demon King, the Empire

might vanish without a trace.

In the blink of an eye, the troops withdrew like a receding tide. The Emperor and Bertus left their positions.

Olivia Lanze looked at the High Priests of the Five Holy Religions with a determined expression.

"We need to address this situation as well. High Priests and commanders, please respond quickly to this crisis."

Although Olivia spoke with a stern face, all the High Priests, and even the Holy Knight, knew what she intended.

They had seen her serious expression, but also noticed the subtle twitch of her lips.

It seemed they could guess what the woman was thinking in this astonishing situation.

But like the Emperor, they had no choice but to leave. They couldn't just stand by and watch the situation unfold.

The Imperial Capital needed the strength of the knights, priests, and High Priests.

They had to do something before the damage spread any further.

"Let's go."

The knights and the High Priests of the Five Holy Religions left their positions.

Only the Holy Knight Commander, including Eleion Bolton, and the direct force he led, remained in place.

In an instant, there were very few people left.

Scarlett and Saviolin Turner stood right next to Reinhardt.

Olivia Lanze.

Ellen Artorius.

However, in a situation where they didn't know what might happen to the Demon King's safety, both Shanafel's elite forces and Eleion Bolton remained on guard.

Despite the circumstances, they were well-prepared for any sudden attacks or unexpected situations.

Even if Olivia Lanze made an unexpected move, they were more than capable of handling it.

Of course, that was assuming Olivia Lanze was the only one who would make such a move.

Silence passed as time went on.

In the midst of a situation where meteors fell on the temple and monsters appeared on the Imperial Capital.

They endured the anxious time, bearing only the duty to monitor the Demon King.

While Olivia observed the situation with an inscrutable expression, Ellen bit her lips and kept a watchful eye.

Saviolin Turner stubbornly stood by Reinhardt's side, refusing to leave.

Bang!

Suddenly, the entrance door burst open like an explosion, and the soldiers guarding the outside poured in.

All of them were dead, bearing deep sword wounds.

And a middle-aged man with a stark expression entered.

"Epinhauser…?"

Saviolin Turner, as if unable to believe it, stared at Epinhauser, who walked in slowly with a sword in hand.

Then.

-Whoosh

As if they had always been there, water vapors gathered in the air, and this time, a silver-haired girl appeared from the opposite side.

"Who is she…?"

"!"

The silver-haired girl, a first-year in the Royal class.

Olivia and Ellen could not help but widen their eyes at the sudden appearance of the girl.

Strangely enough.

The girl, who had been friendly with Reinhardt as soon as she entered, suddenly raised both hands to the sky.

-Crash!

In an instant, numerous ice spears hanging from the ceiling stabbed into the ground, blocking the path so that no one could move.

"What is… happening…!"

That wasn't all.

Scarlett, who had been beside Reinhardt, suddenly picked up the chair he had been tied to and threw it towards Epinhauser.

The Demon King's eyes widened as the chair flew.

"Sarke… gaar…?"

The red-haired girl spoke in an alien voice.

"Your Highness, you must survive."

Meeting the eyes of Scarlett, who was and was not herself, Reinhardt clenched his

teeth.

-Snap!

"Ugh!"

Epinhauser grabbed the chair the Demon King was tied to and set it down, then swung his sword several times to break the restraints, and crushed the handcuffs with his bare hands.

"Professor…?"

Reinhardt looked at him incredulously.

"We don't have much time to talk."

Epinhauser, still with a stark expression and not showing a hint of approval, handed over the Flame of Tuesday, which he had somehow retrieved.

In Epinhauser's hand, the silver sword was ablaze with blue magic.

Swordmaster Epinhauser spoke.

"Go, Reinhardt."

-Bang! Crash! Clang!

"Could it be the Order…?"

"It has nothing to do with the Order."

Epinhauser merely stood in front of Reinhardt and said that.

It had nothing to do with the Order.

Reinhardt was even more shocked by Epinhauser's words. Epinhauser did not add any more, as it was not in his nature to make teasing remarks.

Lucinil was already in the midst of fending off the attacks of the magicians and knights who were attacking her.

Turner could not understand the situation, but was already charging toward Epinhauser.

-Bang!

However, Turner's charge was stopped by someone else's charge before it could reach Epinhauser, and she tumbled to the ground.

"Loyar…?"

A white-haired woman in tattered clothing, who had somehow been freed, looked at the Demon King and spoke.

"Your Highness."

-Groan

"Right now, you must focus on surviving."

Seeing Loyar transform into a white wolf, the Demon King clenched his teeth.

Shanafel's First Unit.

The Holy Knight Commander and his direct subordinates.

They were still outnumbered.

Whether the Demon King intended this disaster or not, if the disaster was indeed planned by the Demon King's subordinates, this situation was bound to happen.

At this point, it's not a matter of judging whether the Demon King is good or evil.

The empire had no choice but to withdraw its forces.

Hence, the planned rescue operation began.

Saviolin Turner could not let the Demon King escape.

Had not the Emperor left the strongest of mankind here in case something happened?

The knights of Shanafel, bound by their duty, must fulfill their obligations.

She carries out the command.

"Do not let the Demon King escape!"

At Turner's shout, they all begin to move.

But behind Reinhardt, Ephinhauser and Lycansloth block their path.

The Demon King struggles to his feet.

His chains are broken.

He witnesses Sarkegaar, who flies around and attacks the mages while freely changing his appearance; Lucinil, who materializes out of steam and attacks the surroundings with magic; and Loyar and Ephinhauser, who block the charging knights.

With a determined expression, Olivia seems to know what she needs to do.

Thud!

Olivia Lanze, who steps forward, runs like the wind toward Reinhardt.

Soon, Olivia Lanze catches up with Reinhardt, grabs his arm, and they escape together.

Ellen Artorius watches the unfolding disaster, chaos, and the Demon King's escape without taking any side, observing silently.

—---

[Achievement Unlocked: 'Completion of Causality']

[You gain 50,000 achievement points.]

[Perk 'Status Purchase' is now active.]

[From now on, you can exchange 5,000 achievement points for one status point.]

"Run. Run, Reinhardt. You must run."

Olivia holds my hand and runs.

There's no time to waste.

Screaming that she doesn't have to do this to save me is pointless.

I thought dying was the best option.

I thought preventing these events by sacrificing my life was the best choice.

But I didn't die.

In the midst of doubt and suspicion, people either didn't or couldn't kill me.

My life was prolonged, albeit clumsily, due to people who had doubted and felt betrayed by me, as much as those who tried to believe in me, and eventually, this incident had occurred.

I had tried to resolve something by dying, but ultimately, I failed to resolve it.

That's why this happened.

I won't consider dying, even if it's all my responsibility in this despair.

I tried to prevent the worst situation with my death.

I tried to accomplish something through death.

But, I couldn't die when I needed to.

Now, there's nothing to be achieved through death.

So, I won't force myself to crave death.

I have to live.

To live.

I don't know what I have to do to live.

But.

With the lives I've exchanged for countless deaths.

With the lives that will be forcibly exchanged with countless other lives.

I can't easily give up.

I can't make countless lives, dying worthless deaths, futile because of me.

I can't make the lives that will die because of me meaningless.

Even if I feel wronged, angry, or sad about the situation I'm in.

I can't die.

I have to live and find what I can do.

I can't wallow in despair, blaming myself for being useless, and believing I shouldn't exist.

I felt that way just moments ago, but I can't anymore.

The scene I saw was beyond anything I could have imagined even when I thought of hell.

-Krururung

There was a crack in the barrier surrounding the temple, and through that crack, meteors poured out and collided with the ground.

Above the sky beyond the temple, unidentified flying beasts spewed crimson flames and horrifyingly white frost.

The catastrophe happening was on a different level from the attack on the Rajeurn by the Demon God Cult.

Is the world coming to an end?

The Gate incident occurred earlier than originally planned.

There's no point in regrets, like nothing would have happened if I had just stayed put.

I have to move forward.

I may not know what to do when I get there, but.

For now, I have to live.

I run with Olivia.

Who will die and who will survive in the unfolding battle?

The knights of Shanafel follow me. My body has been worn down due to the lengthy imprisonment, but I must do what I can.

The concept of buying status with achievement points.

The most important ability is magic power.

The higher the magic power, the more it enhances my overall physical abilities.

In other words, increasing magic power alone has the added effect of raising other overall physical abilities. Therefore, magic power is the most efficient and superior status.

I invest achievement points into magic power.

In an instant, my magic power rises by about 10, jumping from A-rank to S-rank.

This is already on par with a formidable Archmage.

I could invest more points and become a monster with magic power surpassing Saviolin Turner, but I'll hold off for now.

If this happens, will I hear them say that this filthy demon king was hiding his power too?

There's no time for that.

In an instant, my tremendously increased magic power, along with Magic Body Strengthening, breathes life into my weary body. My physical abilities may have diminished due to malnourishment, but my magic power isn't damaged.

I have to leave the temple.

I don't know what I have to do once I'm out, but I have to leave.

But no matter how much my magic power has increased, the ones following me are the Swordmasters of Shanafel's knights.

They will catch up to me soon.

I don't know if I can win even if I fight, but if I'm being attacked, even if I use Alsbringer, I'm outnumbered. The same goes for fighting alongside Olivia.

Is this how I'll be caught and killed?

Just like this?

Will all the sacrifices become meaningless?

As I ran ahead,

In the streets of the temple that had become a battleground,

Someone stood, as if blocking my path.

-Fzzt! Fzzt! Vrrrrrr!

"Who is that…?"

"Liana…"

Liana de Grantz was glaring at me, blue sparks flying from her entire body.

Yes.

Now that she knows I'm the Demon King, she cannot forgive me.

I was actually wondering why she hadn't appeared sooner.

Blocking my path like this, Liana sought to kill me; it felt like a predetermined sequence.

Lightning is instantaneous.

Evading it is nearly impossible.

Furthermore, Liana's lightning, at its peak power, is inescapable. Even if I somehow endure it with my Magic Body Strengthening defense, I'll be caught by the pursuing Shanafel knights.

Death or capture.

I cannot escape her lightning.

Just as I was about to halt my desperate sprint,

A brilliant blue flash, laden with fierce currents, was launched from Liana's outstretched hand.

-Kaboom! Kwoooom!

Overwhelmed by the shockwave that tore through the air, Olivia and I were left speechless.

The lightning bolt grazed my cheek and passed by.

It wasn't aimed at me.

-Agh!

-Arggh!

It targeted the Shanafel knights chasing after me.

We could only stare blankly at the knights hit by the lightning, flung away or

trembling in place.

"What are you doing, you idiot?! Hurry up and come this way?!"

Liana, her face twisted with rage, shouted.

Ah.

Could it be?

Did she know all along?

Since when?

How?

As Olivia and I approached, Liana began to gather lightning without a word.

-Vrrr! Vrrr! Vrrrrrr!

Dozens of sparks flashed in the air, then, in an instant, a lightning bolt as powerful as a thunderstorm struck not only the fallen knights but also swept through their surroundings.

-Kwoooom!

The struck trees exploded, and bricks from the ground burst apart, revealing a scene of devastation.

The intense lightning, at its peak, not only destroyed objects but relentlessly struck the fallen knights as well.

The ferocious lightning, uncontrolled due to her anger and radiating in all directions, said it all.

Liana knew everything.

Chapter 448

A few days ago.

After breakfast, Harriet was dragged to Liana's room, where she couldn't help but hear a shocking story.

"Reinhardt wasn't… responsible?"

"No."

The attack of the Demon King on Rajeurn, where Duke Grantz had died.

Liana knew that it wasn't due to the Demon King's attack, and therefore, it wasn't something Reinhardt had planned.

"I found out recently too. It was so strange that I think my mother kept looking into it."

"I see… Then… What really happened?"

"The Empire killed my father."

“…What?"

Liana's mother, YEllena de Grantz, the Duchess, didn't have a great relationship with her husband. However, she couldn't be free from the shock she received from his death.

Why did the Demon King have to do this?

Why at that place, and why did he have to kill her husband?

The Duchess knew her husband's tendencies and everything about him better than anyone else.

After her own long and thorough investigation, she found out:

What her husband had been doing.

Who he was with, where, and what he was doing when he died.

That's why she realized that the Demon King had no reason to do such a thing.

Why the Empire showed no enthusiasm in investigating the incident.

Through such circumstances, Duchess YEllena de Grantz realized that this was the Empire's own doing.

And she told her daughter, who was obsessed with revenge on the Demon King:

The real enemy isn't the Demon King, but the Empire.

The Empire not only killed Duke Grantz but also framed the Demon King for it.

Liana was powerless.

The Demon King is an obscure and formidable enemy, but the Empire is a clear and overwhelming adversary.

The prince and princess are her classmates, and she could harm them, but Liana didn't want to be satisfied with that.

She wanted to bring down the Empire.

She wanted to strip away the thick face of the Empire that attended her father's funeral with a calm expression after killing him.

First, she had to become stronger.

Not only her own power but also by joining forces with a powerful strength capable of toppling the Empire. That's what she thought.

And then, she learned the fact that Reinhardt was the Demon King.

Setting aside the shocking fact, Liana saw the possibility.

If she was with the Demon King, they might be able to bring down the Empire.

Reinhardt was going to die soon.

"I must save Reinhardt, no matter what it takes."

If the Demon King dies, the possibility of the Empire's collapse disappears.

So, rather than being shocked by the immediate fact, Liana focused on the first thing she had to do for revenge.

"Harriet, what will you do?"

Harriet was at a loss for words at Liana's question.

The most incomprehensible and saddest act of the Demon King was Duke Grantz's death due to the Rajeurn attack.

No matter the reason, why did he have to kill Liana's father? Even if there was a valid reason, should she accept it?

That's what Harriet was thinking.

But it was the Empire's plot. Though they didn't know what was behind the subsequent attack on the Holy Temple, they could be sure of one thing:

Reinhardt had nothing to do with the death of Liana's father, Duke Grantz.

On the contrary, he was framed.

There wasn't much time left.

They didn't know when Reinhardt would be killed by the Empire.

Harriet wanted to believe in Reinhardt.

When you want to believe, you don't need much evidence to be convinced.

"I don't know how to do it, but……"

I believe because I want to believe.

I don't know how to do it or if it's even possible.

With only the two of us, I don't know how we can manage, and if we fail, we die.

"I'll do it with you."

Despite knowing it was an irreversible decision, Harriet decided to save Reinhardt.

—---

And now.

The time given to Harriet and Liana was short, but they had a plan of their own.

However, when meteors began to rain from the sky, and the cries of unknown monsters could be heard from outside the temple, they couldn't help but realize that something was amiss.

They had to choose.

Was all this happening because Reinhardt was truly an evil demon king?

Should they trust Reinhardt despite these events?

For the sake of revenge, Liana, and believing Reinhardt was innocent, Harriet chose the latter.

All plans crumbled, but Reinhardt, who somehow escaped, joined Liana with Olivia Lanze.

From now on, they had to adapt to every situation.

-Boom!

A meteor struck the barrier above the temple, causing a massive shockwave that shook the ground.

Their pursuers were down, exposed to the lightning Liana had unleashed, but not dead.

They still twitched and tried to get up somehow.

As Harriet reached out her hand, the ground began to rise as if being torn apart, pouring down on the knights of Shanafel.

-Rumble!

In an instant, it was as if the knights were buried under a mountain of rocks.

Harriet rushed out of the alley towards Liana and Reinhardt, who didn't understand the sudden situation, and clenched her hand.

"I don't know what's going on, but…… I don't know……"

Overwhelmed by the uncontrollable situation and the unfolding hell, Harriet was on the verge of tears.

She believes in Reinhardt.

And from this moment on, she will part ways with everyone except those here.

Her father.

Her mother.

Her brother.

Her classmates.

She must abandon her status as a princess and everything she has, everything she should have, and everything she knows.

She stakes it all on trusting Reinhardt alone.

"I…… I'll believe in you……"

Harriet doesn't know if it's worth it, if it's the right thing to do.

"You tried to save everyone. This…… wasn't what you intended…… I'll believe that……"

She decided to believe Reinhardt's words about wanting to save everyone.

So, in this moment, when many people turned their backs on Reinhardt, Harriet wished to become his strength, and chose to stand by his side.

"Let's go, Reinhardt."

Olivia takes the lead.

The sound of the Shanafel Swordmasters, buried under the boulders, breaking through the rocks could be heard.

The real monsters are, in fact, humans.

Even in this gate crisis, where the world deserves to be destroyed, humans conquer the monsters and rebuild civilization.

Aren't humans, of all beings, the ones who truly deserve to be called monsters?

-Boom! Roar!

Humans are strong.

More than anything else in this world.

More than any other race.

Humans are the most fearsome and the most powerful.

—---

The situation at the temple was relatively better.

"Hey, you! What's going on here? We had our plans too, but with the situation like this, what's what……!"

Liana, exasperated, asked me while looking at the sky filled with meteors.

"We'll talk later!"

But there was no time for conversation now.

Meteors rained down, but the temple's barrier blocked most of them. Students screamed and fled, but there were no rampaging monsters within the temple like there were outside.

The knights of Shanafel pursued us once again.

"Senior! Carry me!"

"Alright! Got it!"

Since Liana had the least stamina, Olivia reluctantly carried her, irritation apparent in her voice.

-Boom! Crash!

The royal mage corps' offensive spells targeted us, but Harriet was handling them.

Where would we run?

Where would we go, and what would we do?

Even though I am the Demon King.

Olivia, Liana, and Harriet would not be able to return to the world of humans.

It wasn't the time to think about the future, but I couldn't help but do so.

How am I supposed to take responsibility for them?

Fortunately, all the combat-ready forces were outside the temple.

We couldn't climb over the collapsed buildings, so we had to find detours in real-time. Liana held back the pursuing swordmasters, while Harriet continuously erected barriers to keep them at bay.

"Huff… Hah…”

Harriet eventually showed the limits of her physical stamina, her body seemingly

burdened.

We just needed to cross the temple gate.

Once we crossed it, we could teleport somewhere to escape.

If we met any of the council's Vampire Lords outside the temple, we could use mass teleportation to escape the Imperial Capital.

Would Sarkegaar, Lucinil, Loyar, and Epinhauser be safe?

Surely, Eleris must have caused this gate incident.

Was Eleris okay?

What was she thinking when she activated Akasha, and how did she feel now?

Only devastating thoughts circulated in my mind.

And then, somehow fending off our pursuers, we reached the temple's main entrance.

We just had to break through that door.

Before it, I saw Ellen, clad in a cloak of flames and wielding a pitch-black sword.

"…"

Ellen Artorius stood before the four of us, blocking our way.

As if she were the gatekeeper herself.

Ellen stood in our way.

I didn't know how she had gotten ahead of us.

But Ellen was there, standing in our path.

More than anything, that sword.

It seemed like Lament, but its completely transformed appearance gave off an ominous vibe.

"Move. Are you determined to be an obstacle until the end?"

Olivia gritted her teeth and glared at Ellen.

Liana stared at Ellen, biting her lip.

In that moment, all of us felt it.

No matter what we did, we could not pass Ellen Artorius.

It was an almost instinctive intuition.

The Magic Body Strengthening enveloping Ellen's body felt entirely different now.

Had Ellen become a swordmaster? When? How?

But holding the pitch-black Lament, if Ellen intended to stop us, it was evident that none of us could face her.

Ellen's sword was stronger than Olivia's.

The sun god's cloak would block Liana's lightning.

And Harriet's magic wouldn't be able to penetrate Ellen's defenses.

Furthermore, Ellen had resistance to supernatural abilities, so my Word Magic wouldn't work on her.

Ellen, with a calm expression, stared at me.

Wearing the sun god's cloak and wielding the dark sword that seemed to have stolen a strand of night, Ellen asked me.

"Reinhardt. Just answer one thing."

“…Speak."

Ellen took a deep breath and looked at me.

"Why didn't you accept it?"

At those words, I felt a shiver run down my spine.

"You should have accepted it."

The others didn't understand what was being said.

Only I knew.

The mantle of the sun god, Lapelt.

Why hadn't I accepted it?

"You should have taken it. Clearly."

If you were the Demon King and had been using me all this time.

Why would you miss the opportunity to possess three sacred relics?

Ellen seemed to have a final question.

In this hellish world where my subordinates try to destroy the world to save me, and meteors fall upon the temple.

In a situation where it was certain that my subordinates had caused it all.

It seemed Ellen was trying to trust me one last time.

The four of us had to leave the temple.

We might not return.

I looked at the transformed Lament.

A sword that carries the meaning of being forged in tears.

In sorrow, Lament had gained an unknown power.

It was a sword that seemed capable of cutting through anything.

If sadness made Ellen stronger.

If that was the key to surviving in this hell, this disaster that struck too early.

Shouldn't Ellen continue to be sad?

No, to overcome that sadness.

Even to the point of having hatred for me, and using the true power of the sun god's mantle, manifested through hatred.

In that case.

Should I deliberately lie to Ellen?

"I am…"

"No."

As I tried to say something, Ellen shook her head.

"I'd rather not listen."

Ellen looked at me.

"You seem like you're about to lie again."

As if she wouldn't listen to painful words, Ellen shook her head.

"If that's the case, I'd rather not listen."

Ellen looked at me.

No, her gaze was further away.

Looking behind me, the swordmasters of Shanafel were approaching.

"Go, Reinhardt."

The turning point in history.

What was the turning point in history when I did not accept Lapelt? Now I knew clearly.

I should be dead now.

If I had taken Lapelt from Ellen.

I would have been killed by Ellen's hand by now.

The fact that I hadn't taken Lapelt remained as the last doubt in Ellen's heart.

It remained as something like a last hope.

That had led Ellen not to kill me, but to make another choice.

In a situation where it was certain that my subordinates had caused the world-shattering disaster, she chose to save me, the source of it all, instead of killing me.

Ellen blocked the Shanafel knights chasing me as she passed by me.

"You… what are you trying to…"

"It's alright."

Ellen, blocking the knights, clenched her sword.

"I won't kill anyone. No one."

Ellen told the swordmasters of Shanafel that she wouldn't kill, not that she wouldn't die.

To that extent, it seemed Ellen believed she could subdue all of them.

"So, go."

Can we meet again?

Is it possible?

If we meet again.

Can it be the same as before?

"From the beginning to the end, it's all my fault."

Is she regretting?

If she had trusted me, if only a little sooner, or if we had talked before everything had turned out like this.

Would these events have never occurred? Is that what she thinks?

"I'm sorry I couldn't trust you."

Like how I think that if I hadn't done anything, the Gate incident would not have happened.

Ellen thought that if she hadn't done anything, this wouldn't have happened; if she had trusted me, these events would never have occurred.

It seemed she was thinking along the same lines as me.

For the last time, Ellen looked back at me.

Not just me, but Olivia, Liana, and Harriet too.

She looked at each of them once.

Even in a situation like this, seeing those who choose to follow and trust me.

Witnessing others who have done what she could not do herself.

"I… I don't deserve your affection."

I couldn't trust when it mattered most.

And that's why things have come to this.

So, it seemed that Ellen had vowed not to allow herself to have feelings for me.

Leaving those words behind, Ellen runs towards the Shanafel knights pursuing us.

We are trying to leave.

Ellen stays behind, attempting to thwart the pursuit for me.

We must live.

You and I both.

When and where we will meet again, and under what circumstances, I don't know.

Even if the only future left for us is one where we point our swords at each other.

Wishing that neither of us will die until then.

I ran towards the entrance of the temple.

Chapter 449

Her thoughts had been wrong.

It wasn't that he had deceived her, knowing everything.

It wasn't that he had tried to deceive her and take revenge, knowing everything.

He had cared for her, knowing everything.

He had cherished her, knowing everything.

The person who had no choice but to hate her.

The person who was strange for not killing her on the spot.

He had cared for her.

She didn't know that simple thought, that simple answer.

Reinhardt's love for her must have been greater than her love for him.

Loving a classmate and loving the family of one's enemy were entirely different issues.

He cared for someone who he should not love, but she couldn't trust that.

Just once, at the most crucial moment.

If she had trusted him.

But she couldn't, and the world was on the verge of destruction.

It was all her fault.

The situation was caused by the minions of the Demon King who possessed a strange artifact called Akasha.

But Reinhardt didn't want this situation.

If Reinhardt hadn't been captured.

If the minions of the Demon King hadn't created such a desperate situation to save Reinhardt.

This wouldn't have happened.

In that case.

It was her fault for not trusting Reinhardt at the most crucial moment, causing all this.

In the end, it wasn't the Demon King but herself who caused this situation.

That's why.

Everything was her fault.

It was just a day's difference.

The clue was right in front of her, and at that time, Reinhardt was not in the Imperial Palace.

If she had only endured for one more day.

If she had held on for a day and asked Reinhardt everything first.

This wouldn't have happened.

That's why.

It was all her fault.

Entangled in piled-up misunderstandings and lies, the situation had become so confusing that she didn't know what to believe, and time dragged on, leading to this.

A single day of misunderstandings and distrust had brought about all this.

It had ruined everything.

Liana, Olivia, and Harriet tried to trust Reinhardt even in this situation.

But she couldn't.

If the world was to be destroyed.

The greatest responsibility lay not with the Demon King's minions but with herself.

Ellen thought so.

She didn't know what Reinhardt's dream was, but since she had ruined it, she no longer had the right to care for him.

She was the sinner of the world.

And Reinhardt's sinner.

I must.

Take responsibility for this situation.

Whether by death or something else.

Ellen Artorius had to take responsibility.

"Crack!"

"Ugh!"

"Ellen! What are you doing right now!"

In front of the knights of Shanafel, Ellen broke a third sword, as if she wouldn't let anyone leave the temple.

The Swordmasters of Shanafel were astonished by Ellen Artorius, wielding the Void Sword that shattered and cut through even the Aura Blade with just a touch.

"Step back. I don't want to hurt you."

"At this rate, we'll lose… we'll lose the Demon King!"

"Let him go. That's why I'm doing this."

There were five Swordmasters, but Ellen exuded an aura that if they crossed the line she had drawn, her Void Sword would cut not their swords but their necks.

Ellen's skill was formidable, but the power of the Void Sword Lament was an absolute cutting force that even troubled the Swordmasters.

Combined with the divine artifact of the Sun God, Ellen's defense did not allow the Swordmasters' attacks to breach her in the slightest.

The knights of Shanafel began to retreat.

-Screeeeaa

Flying monsters began to enter the temple through the broken barriers.

"We should prioritize killing the monsters, not chasing the Demon King."

The world might be destroyed because one couldn't trust the person they loved.

Ellen Artorius had become the protagonist of such a ludicrous situation.

How much responsibility would she bear if the world were to end?

Perhaps.

It could be all her fault.

She shouldn't love Reinhardt anymore; someone like her shouldn't.

Since she had made up her mind, Ellen had to do something else. She couldn't allow herself to help Reinhardt. That was a task for those who had trusted him.

She had no place there.

She wasn't qualified.

That's why she had to do something else.

The only other thing she could do.

Take responsibility for this situation.

Hold up the world that crumbles because of her.

Protect the world that might be destroyed.

Even though she knew it wouldn't be enough to atone for her sins.

There was nothing else she could do.

Regain Reinhardt's trust, rebuild their relationship.

Someone like her shouldn't hope for such things.

That's what Ellen thought.

—---

When they left the temple gate, they expected a worse situation than inside the temple.

However, the situation wasn't as terrible as they thought.

Krrrrr

The colossal warp gate in front of the temple gate had already been destroyed.

The interior of the temple originally had the strongest human forces gathered. Therefore, their response was swift.

The royal court magicians and grand wizards were usually dispatched throughout the continent. But now, due to his existence, they had gathered at the imperial capital.

Of course, there were monsters appearing, corpses strewn in the streets, and collapsed buildings everywhere. People screamed and fled.

But the Imperial Capital didn't seem to be on the brink of collapse.

Flying monsters in the sky were shot down by lightning, fireballs, or unidentified magic from the ground.

The emperor drastically reduced the forces around him and chose to deal with the disaster in the capital.

It seemed that he had properly understood and accepted his statement that the colossal warp gate must be destroyed first.

It was good that the damage in the imperial capital was reduced, but it meant that the damage to the regional bases would be amplified, as more forces were gathered here.

The empire couldn't intervene in every location.

As the capital quickly stabilized, the damage to the entire continent would grow.

And, the rapid stabilization of the capital's chaos wasn't good for him.

They had to escape the capital.

Fortunately, not only the guards but also the elite imperial and holy knights were busy dealing with the situation. The area around the monster-free temple gate was deserted, albeit with signs of destruction.

Krrrrrrr!

A crack appeared in the air, and a woman with red hair emerged from it.

"Your Highness!"

Eleris appeared and hugged me tightly.

"Are you alright?"

"…"

Instead of answering my worried question, Eleris bit her lip, unable to say anything.

Eleris had done the only thing she could do – operating Akasha.

Without causing such a level of chaos, there would have been no way for our meager forces to rescue me.

And even then, it wasn't enough. If it weren't for the unexpected help of Olivia, Harriet, Liana, and Ellen, I wouldn't have even been able to leave the temple's main entrance.

"First of all, we must leave this place."

Eleris spoke with trembling eyes, as if her feelings and thoughts were not worth mentioning.

Everyone seemed a bit cautious because they didn't know who Eleris was.

"Who is that person?"

Harriet, however, had seen Eleris before. The person I had been supporting in the Lich's tomb.

She had appeared again, the one who had lent her tremendous magical power. I spoke to Harriet.

"We don't have time to explain in detail. Let's get out of here first, and then I'll tell you everything."

At my words, Harriet nodded with a stern expression.

“Aaaaaah!”

-Grrrrrrrr!

The nameless monsters cried out, filling the air.

“Aaaaaah!”

“The judgment of the gods has descended!”

The screams of terrified people echoed all around.

"Gallarush and Luvien are casting Mass Teleport from the southern part of the Imperial Capital. If we can just make it there…”

How far had we run?

Some knights, who seemed to be rushing to deal with the monsters, discovered us.

"Scottla Kelton…”

We had run into the Shanafel's third squad led by the captain, Scottla Kelton.

He had been present during the recent interrogation.

Would we be able to break through Shanafel's knights, even with Eleris's help?

Seeing their expressions, Eleris spread her arms to shield us and moved us behind her.

Scottla Kelton looked at us intently.

The Demon King had escaped.

As a knight of Shanafel, it was his duty to prevent our escape.

The knights, including the Swordmasters, slowly approached us.

"Your Highness, let me…”

"Be quiet."

I knew what Eleris was trying to do.

I knew what she wanted.

"Do not search for the tomb in front of me."

It was obvious what Eleris wanted.

I couldn't just let her die like that.

Though she wasn't my real mother.

Since I arrived in this world, Eleris had always been like a mother to me.

Even if the plan failed.

Even if the wind collapsed.

Even if I opened the door to destruction with my own hands.

I have no intention of letting her find peace in death.

She must live a little longer.

As if trying to force this life, exchanged for countless others, to survive despite knowing that everything could have been resolved if I hadn't done anything, and unknowingly bringing about this insane situation.

Eleris also must live.

She must live and do something.

Even if she can't atone for her sins, escaping from everything through death would be a cowardly act.

Death won't atone for her sins.

I wouldn't let Eleris find a place to die.

Watching the approaching Swordmasters, including Scottla Kelton.

I grasp the Flame of Tuesday.

"It reacts to dark emotions, you said."

Eleris had told me that the Flame of Tuesday, a sinister artifact, reacted more intensely to killing intent, hatred, and anger.

Certainly, the emotions I'm feeling now are dark.

No, they're closer to the abyss itself.

Despair, rage, pain.

And yet, the compulsion to live.

In the midst of annihilation, not even knowing what to do, I must live because I brought this about.

Without knowing what my current emotions are, only knowing that they are darker than any emotion I've ever felt while living.

I hold the Flame of Tuesday.

Infusing it with the power of Self-Suggestion.

The power of Word Magic.

The Flame of Tuesday, reflecting my current despair.

To the Essence of Flames.

"Ascend."

I commanded.

Rumble!

"Ugh!"

"What is this…!"

A colossal wall of flames, seemingly capable of melting the world, erupted between the Swordmasters and us.

Where the wall of fire rose, the ground melted and bubbled like lava.

"Let's go."

With the fiery barrier separating us from our enemies,

We ran southward.

—---

The defensive posture of the Imperial Capital had collapsed.

Though some measures were taken against the monsters pouring out of the warp gate, there was no strength left to catch the Demon King, who was running to escape the heart of the empire.

Scottla Kelton's forces, too, had no choice but to focus on dealing with the monsters that were slaughtering civilians, instead of chasing the Demon King.

As a price for capturing the Demon King,

As a price for not trusting the Demon King, humanity had to pay the cost.

Rumble

The collapsed main building, the debris of the great hall.

Epinhauser and Loyar's legs were bound by Saviolin Turner.

Epinhauser, Loyar, Sarkegaar, and even Lucinil.

They had to pay the price for stopping time.

Lucinil was incapacitated, her limbs bound by magic chains, Sarkegaar, who had annoyed everyone with his shapeshifting abilities, was tied up in a spatial barrier, and Loyar was groaning, having returned to human form with her body covered in blood.

And then,

Epinhauser, with Tempesta embedded in his abdomen, bleeding from the debris of the collapsed building, was being silently watched by Saviolin Turner.

"Why."

Saviolin Turner's voice trembled.

"Why did you have to do this, Epinhauser?"

As far as she knew, Epinhauser was a patriot. He had a strong desire to love and protect the empire more than anyone else.

He had joined Shanafel and been active, but at some point, he had decided to train successors and had been appointed as a teacher of the Temple Royal Class instead of Shanafel.

Saviolin Turner, who had seen Epinhauser up close, had no doubt about his character.

But he had sided with the Demon King.

The demon forces could do so because they were demons.

But she could not understand why Epinhauser, a human and someone who loved the empire more than anyone else, had made such a choice.

She was the one who dealt the decisive blow, but she was also the most confused.

"Why did you, who were on the empire's side more than anyone else, do this?"

"…"

Bleeding from his forehead, Epinhauser looked up at Saviolin Turner.

"That, too, was… more than anyone else… for the empire… for humanity…"

"…The Demon King?"

Epinhauser silently nodded his head.

Saviolin Turner could not yet fully accept that the Demon King did not wish for destruction.

After all, hadn't the calamity that seemed to crumble the world begun? Even if the Demon King had taught them a solution, wasn't that the truth?

But Epinhauser was Reinhardt's teacher.

At the very least, he had been watching Reinhardt for much longer than she had.

"Did you already know that Reinhardt was the Demon King?"

"…"

Epinhauser did not answer.

Epinhauser was not a man to plot something without reason or act impulsively.

He must have done something so utterly incomprehensible because it was backed by his convictions and determination.

Even knowing that he would die, he faced off against Saviolin Turner, the strongest human.

He wouldn't have dug his own grave in such a meaningless place.

Epinhauser, bleeding and dying, showed a subtle smile in the face of death.

"And…"

Epinhauser had been observed for quite some time, but this was the first time she had seen him smile.

"The teacher… saving his disciple…"

The teacher, who had always seemed cold, was slowly dying.

As he died, she spoke.

"Is it… such a special thing…"

It seemed as if it was something he only had to do.

Saviolin Turner watched Epinhauser's breath stop until the end.

"…"

These days, she was filled with doubt about everything she had built up.

Reinhardt.

The Demon King.

The humans who believe in and follow the Demon King, even though he is the Demon King.

Despite not having to do so, there exist those who believe in and love the Demon King.

The countless appearances and aspects of the Demon King she had seen.

While seeing the Demon King's appearance as he claimed he didn't desire destruction and wanted to save humans.

If he had wanted humans to be divided, the Demon King, who should have said that the raid of Rajeurn by the Demon King was a self-written drama of the Empire, didn't mention it even once.

And, in a situation where it was almost certain that if she had really believed the Demon King's words, such things wouldn't have happened.

"Now… I don't know anything."

Saviolin Turner felt lost.

Chapter 450

The Gate Incident refers to the phenomenon of monsters pouring out of the Warp Gate.

The incident must progress to a certain extent for monsters to spread throughout the land. If some time has passed since the incident began, the outskirts of the city and even villages without Warp Gates can be relatively peaceful.

For there to be even a small Warp Gate, the settlement must be of city-scale.

In the initial stages of the incident, the most dangerous places are the capital and other large cities.

My companions and I, guided by Eleris, managed to reach the place where Gallarush and Luvien were casting Mass Teleport. We arrived in a remote forest area, far away from the capital.

I don't know what Antirianus is up to.

However, we arrived in a tranquil blue forest, completely unrelated to the calamity unfolding in the capital.

Myself, Olivia, Liana, Harriet, Eleris, Luvien, and Gallarush.

Upon seeing Luvien with long ears, and Orc Vampire Gallarush, the three who had followed me without hesitation to save me turned pale.

"You… you really…"

Liana, with a shocked expression, pointed at me.

"Am I really the Demon King all along? Did you not know this when you followed me?"

"No… I mean, I did, but…"

Liana stared blankly at the gray, massive Orc Vampire.

"Elves… they really exist…"

Harriet, in a different sense, gaped at Luvien, equally dumbfounded.

Although we didn't think we could escape the capital safely, we managed to do so. We now found ourselves in a quiet, peaceful forest, filled with the chirping of unknown birds. However, in reality, peace was an illusion.

Not only the capital but monsters were also emerging from Warp Gates all over the world. Many cities were destroyed, unable to cope properly, and their affiliated cities would face the same fate due to the spreading monsters.

Eleris, despite having caused this event in her efforts to save me, couldn't even lift her head.

Her efforts to stop the Gate Incident had actually triggered it.

But we couldn't afford to be bound by despair.

I looked at the people here.

In the end, these were the ones who believed in me and accompanied me to this point. I had to explain everything to them first.

"Alright. Since this is our first meeting, let me introduce you. These are ancient Vampire Lords, older than most countries, and my allies."

Eleris of Tuesday.

Luvien of Thursday.

Gallarush of Friday.

Upon hearing the unheard term 'Vampire Lord,' all three were inevitably bewildered.

"But… it's daytime, isn't it?"

"Yes…"

"Just let it be."

There was no time to explain what a Vampire Lord was.

"And there's someone not present… you know, Lucinil, who used to be close to me."

"Yes."

“…Why?"

"Oh… I just remembered, I saw her earlier…”

Olivia had seen the suddenly-appeared Lucinil.

"Lucinil is… one of the Vampire Lords who infiltrated the temple."

I couldn't help but worry about Lucinil's safety while speaking.

—---

Everyone was shocked to hear Lucinil's true identity, but there was no time to offer a satisfactory explanation.

There was too much to explain.

Assuming everyone believed me without doubting my words, I told them everything I could.

Just as I did with Eleris.

I remembered everything from the day the Demon King died at the hands of the Hero.

I knew about the Gate Incident, and I had knowledge of a certain extent of the future.

In order to prevent the Gate Incident, I had done everything up to this point.

Tracking down Akasha and Cantus Magna.

Discovering Akasha's true identity, and just as I was about to reveal everything, the

situation became entangled like this.

And so, my subordinates caused the Gate Incident to save me, which is why I am here now.

Eleris had already known the story, but not only the three from the Temple, but also Gallarush and Luvien had widened their eyes upon hearing my words.

"So, in trying to prevent the Gate Incident, I ended up being the direct cause of it."

I don't know what kind of expression I had when I said that.

However, Olivia and Harriet were biting their lips.

As the mastermind behind the Gate Incident, Eleris couldn't say a word out of guilt.

It was obvious.

Sarkegaar and Antirianus must have been unable to resist their impulses.

Of course, that doesn't mean Eleris's sins would be erased.

"Anyway, just because the situation has become like this, I can't do nothing. I have to do something."

It's ridiculous that I, the cause of the Gate Incident, am going around cleaning up its aftermath.

But, I can't not do it either.

My life and the lives of tens of millions, or even billions, have been exchanged. Even if I didn't want it, it has already happened.

So even if it's just one person.

Isn't it my duty to save the life of even one person who might die because of me?

Antirianus must have wished for me to collapse in despair, but I have no intention of doing so.

I thought I would save everyone.

I tried to, knowing that I couldn't save everyone.

And if I ended up being the cause of a situation where everyone would die.

If it came to that.

If I was thrown into such a situation.

Did they think I would fall?

Did they think I would collapse?

Did they think I wouldn't be able to rise again?

If my death could save everyone, I would have done it.

However, my death now would be meaningless and achieve nothing.

Since I can't accomplish anything by dying, I will do what I can while alive.

If I can't find meaning in death, I will find it in life.

I am not a strong person, but I have thought a lot during the time I was captured.

In resignation, I wished that everything would end with my death.

But I didn't die.

I had to survive and witness the Gate Incident unfold, and then I was thrown back into the world.

The world wants me to crumble.

Out of spite for that malice, out of injustice, out of sadness.

I cannot simply fall apart.

I will not just wallow in regret in some corner of the continent, blaming myself for

the Gate Incident.

If I must be strong, then I will be strong.

I don't know what is right in this situation.

But not getting up after collapsing must be evil.

I wished for good, but I can no longer realize it.

At least, I will avoid evil.

I have decided to keep evil at bay.

I cannot fall apart.

I cannot hesitate.

I must do what I can.

"Reinhardt… Do you really have to save the humans? Why?"

It was Olivia's question.

Those who didn't believe in you, who only hated you, and even when they found out about this day, in the end, they will only hate you, blaming the Demon King for everything.

Why do you have to save such humans? Olivia seemed unable to accept my words.

"Because I created this world like this."

If that was the reality.

That is the place where imagination became reality.

Try to solve the injustice you created, only to face even greater injustice.

Thrown into such a situation.

It's the world I created, and the injustice I created.

So I must solve it.

No one understands what I mean.

It's okay if they don't understand.

I do what I can in the given situation.

Even when I didn't know the cause of the Gate Incident, I did what I could in the given situation.

Now, as the Gate Incident has unfolded.

I still do what I can in the given situation.

There is nothing else.

"From now on, I must somehow calm this situation."

"I don't think I can do everything on my own. What I can do alone is very limited, and considering the scale, it might not be that valuable."

"I'm trying to do what I can, but I'll probably need a lot of people since doing it alone won't mean much."

"Nobody needs to cooperate with me. If they don't accept what I'm trying to do, they don't have to do anything. But I owe some responsibility to the people who trusted me and came this far. At least, a place where we can live safely. I'll provide that much."

"And I'm trying to do something I can't do alone. So, it has to be 'us,' not 'me.'"

"We need to secure a place where we can be safe, build our power, create followers, and grow stronger… That's what we need to do… So…"

The Gate Incident occurred.

Therefore, to solve this, I can no longer be satisfied with just myself or a small force.

"I will rebuild Darkland."

So now, I have no choice but to truly dream of rebuilding Darkland.

Me.

Now that everything has become like this, now that everything is broken.

I realized that I must become the king of a rebuilt Darkland, not just the prince of a ruined country.

—---

To calm the Gate Incident, I will rebuild the demon world. Jumping in alone, I could only destroy a few gates at most. The future of dying in vain is all too certain.

I am far stronger than ordinary humans, but I have limits.

Even if I'm a Swordmaster or a Grandmaster, nothing will change.

Even if Swordmasters are superhumans, can they save the world?

Through the power of those who follow me, I will save villages, districts, cities, and bring about the complete end of the Gate Incident.

So, it's better to use my political power and influence rather than my own strength.

"I haven't thought about who will follow me or how I can form my power. But for now…"

"I know."

As I was about to say something, Olivia spoke up.

"What?"

"People who will unconditionally support you. No, people."

I think I knew what Olivia was talking about.

"Regarding the Five Great Religious Orders… As long as I'm the confirmed cause of the Gate Incident, they won't support me even if I have the sacred object, right?"

"No, not them."

Olivia shook her head vigorously.

"Believers of the Demon God Cult."

Ah.

Only then did the proposition, which I had forgotten due to the events that had occurred, come to mind.

The Demon God Cult.

"I know where the Demon God Cult's followers' base is, where they are."

When did she find out?

"Believers of the Demon God Cult think they should die not just in pretense but in reality, according to your words. I saw it all."

Olivia had meticulously informed me that since then, the ruins in the Gelkorgis desert region had become a stronghold for the followers of the Demon God Cult, and that she had already identified all of their bases.

Originally, she intended to mobilize the Holy Knights to eliminate them, thinking they would become my enemies. However, she was caught by the knights of Shanafel before she could report to the Holy Knights, and she added this to her story.

The followers of Demon God Cult.

They are dangerous, but right now, I need allies.

Above all, I need power in this situation. The followers of Demon God Cult, who would worship me against my will and absolutely obey my words, are a force that must be secured in the current situation.

If the timing had been off, this would have happened.

Had the timing been slightly different, the followers of Demon God Cult would have already been wiped out by the Holy Knights.

This discrepancy turned out to be both a terrible event for me and a stroke of luck at some level.

Harriet and Liana seemed unable to understand how Olivia could have come by such information.

Because they didn't know that Olivia could wield the power of Demon God.

It must have been easy for Olivia to gain the trust of the Demon God Cult followers just by wielding their power. Reaching out to them would have been the easiest thing for her.

"Alright… securing the Demon God Cult followers as subordinates is important for now…"

Securing the power of the Demon God Cult followers as my own has also become a crucial condition.

Moreover, the Gelkorgis desert region is uninhabited. There are no warp gates there, so not only is the area unaffected by the gate situation, but they probably don't even know that such a situation is unfolding on the continent.

Fudududuk!

From somewhere, a swarm of black bats began to fly toward us from one side of the forest. Harriet pointed at them, her face turning pale.

"What… what is that…?"

"Don't worry."

Soon, the bats converged into one shape before us and transformed into an old man wearing a black suit and a wide-brimmed hat, leaning on a cane.

Antirianus bowed his head deeply, removing his hat as he looked at me.

"It is an honor to meet the great one."

Antirianus seemed genuinely delighted by the situation, smiling as he put his hat back on.

Yes.

He must be overjoyed by the mess I've created by finding the answer to everything.

"That old man is Antirianus the Lord of Saturday, the last of the Vampire Lords I mentioned earlier. He's insane, so don't get too close."

"Heh, your words are harsh."

Despite my harsh words, Antirianus merely chuckled.

The amount of information these three had to take in was overwhelming. However, there was no time to calmly explain everything now.

"Lord of Wednesday and Duke Sarkegaar have been captured, and Duke Loyar and Epinhauser have perished."

Antirianus had brought the news.

Master Epinhauser and Loyar were dead.

"Why… Professor…?"

"Our Professor?"

Both Liana and Harriet turned pale at the news of Professor Epinhauser's death.

I didn't know the reason either.

Professor Epinhauser had tried to save me and said it wasn't the will of the Order.

He had betrayed the Order's intentions to save me and died.

Loyar had died as well.

It was unlikely that the members of the Rotary Club had survived.

I wondered what had become of Adriana.

While there were survivors, there were too many who were dead or missing.

"…"

The crushing weight of despair was almost unbearable, as if it were squeezing my heart.

I couldn't comprehend why Professor Epinhauser had died for me.

I wanted to think about the deaths of Loyar and the club members, but there was no time to drown in those thoughts.

I never knew what it meant to be a king, nor did I ever desire to become one.

I had no intention of responding to Sarkegaar's wish for me to become a king.

However, I decided to become a king.

A king isn't someone who wallows in sadness and despair, confined to a corner, sinking into the depths of desolation.

What's done is done.

Who loved me and how much I loved someone.

The memories I shared with them, and what they meant to me.

Rather than reminiscing, I must be a being that embraces the future.

So, I put it off, endlessly pushing those thoughts back, and delaying them until everything was alright.

Eventually forgetting.

A being who can no longer remember what to reminisce about, who to remember, and what to grieve for.

That would be a king.

Loyar is dead.

Epinhauser is dead.

However.

Lucinil and Sarkegaar have been captured.

They are still alive.

I'll postpone my grief for the dead.

When I can grieve, I don't know.

Since I can't reverse death, I must delay the deaths of my people who are still alive.

"Antirianus, can you deliver a message to the Empire?"

"Of course, that's easily doable."

I must become a being that embraces the future.

I cannot be tied down by the past.

"Tell them that although the situation has occurred, we will deal with the Gate incident on our own, and we have no intention of fighting humans."

The Gate incident has already happened.

"But if they kill Lucinil and Sarkegaar, that moment will mark the beginning of a permanent hostile relationship."

This is not a joke.

"Deliver it like that."

I can't destroy the Empire as it is.

"I'm sure they know that if I absorb the power of the Demon God Cult, I could easily do so."

However, if I absorb the power of the Demon God Cult now, the problem wouldn't be the Empire, but the potential to bring about humanity's downfall.

The Empire could be foolish enough not to know that. Therefore, they might kill Lucinil and Sarkegaar.

If that happens, I will destroy the Empire and establish a new one on its ruins.

There's no need for humanity's master to always be human.

"Heh, hehehe… I will, of course, deliver your message, oh great one…"

Antirianus seemed delighted by my words and decisions, chuckling as he looked at me, and I narrowed my eyes.

He was undoubtedly the one who provoked Eleris.

"It won't be fun if you twist my words."

At my remark, Antirianus shook his head in feigned innocence.

"Hehe… Would I pursue such trivial amusement?"

Right.

I believe Antirianus when he says he won't engage in hasty pranks unless they offer extreme amusement.

-Squeak! Squeak!

-Whoosh!

Everyone watched Antirianus as he transformed into a swarm of bats and flew away, looking uneasy.

I threatened that if the Empire threatened Lucinil and Sarkegaar's safety, they would see a real disaster.

The Empire may hate me, but they can't ignore the consequences of making me an enemy.

It might be difficult to retrieve them immediately, but it could be possible in the long run.

"Archdemon, so from now on, do you plan to head to the Gelkorgis Desert?"

Luvien asked me with a glance.

It seemed like Gallarush and Luvien intended to continue cooperating with me.

Even if they decided to leave, I had no right to stop them. They had done so much for me, who had nothing to offer in return.

"The Gelkorgis Desert is my base as well. If I know the exact location of the Demon God Cult followers, I can relay your message."

"I see. But that's not our top priority."

There was something more important than securing power.

A base.

A land where we could be safe.

And before that.

I looked at Harriet and Liana.

"What are you guys going to do about your families?"

The two had tried to save me in some way. I didn't know their plan, but it was messed up due to the sudden Gate Incident.

However, it was clear that they were thinking their families would be in danger now that this situation had erupted. It wasn't just their lives at risk, but the lives of everyone on the continent.

"Arunaria… will be fine… I trust my father…"

The capital of Saint Owan Duchy, Arunaria.

Harriet clenched her fist and bowed her head, saying that the Grand Duke would be more worried about his daughter who had sided with the Demon King.

Of course, Harriet seemed to believe that Saint Owan Duchy would be able to handle the chaos of the Gate Incident.

Now, I looked at Liana. Liana gazed at the other side of the forest and spoke slowly, as if sighing.

“…I told my mother what I would be doing today."

Somehow, Liana knew that it wasn't me but the empire that was the target of her revenge. That meant her mother knew too.

Liana had decided to side with the Demon King to destroy the empire, and her mother had accepted it.

After the death of Duke Grantz, it was clear that the duchess had gone through many emotional changes.

The duchess had allowed Liana to risk her life for her father's revenge.

But now, the one in danger wasn't Liana but the duchess.

Unlike Harriet, who trembled in fear but trusted her father's safety due to the power of the Grand Duke and the Duchy, the duchess's life was in danger. Even if she were safe until the Gate Incident stabilized, as long as Liana was confirmed to be on my side, the duchess couldn't be safe.

Liana's fist trembled.

"So my mother… knows. We went there before…”

Huh?

Could it be?

"The Edina Archipelago?"

"Yes, she's hiding in a villa there. If I do this… it will become dangerous…”

Liana knew there would be consequences, so Duchess Grantz had fled in advance.

But the Gate Incident must have erupted in the Edina Archipelago as well, putting the duchess's life in danger. That's why Liana decided to help me for now, but she couldn't be at ease knowing her mother's life was in danger.

"It's a good thing."

But at my words, Liana narrowed her eyes at me, and Harriet shuddered as if asking what I was talking about.

"What? You think it's a good thing?"

"Of course it is."

I crossed my arms.

"From now on, we're going to the Edina Archipelago."

Starting now, that's where we'll make our base.

In rescuing the endangered Airi, we would travel to a place far from the continent, where news was delivered exceptionally late: the Edina Archipelago.

The isolated islands were the perfect location for us to evade the watchful eyes of the empire while we built our power.

"We shall conquer the Edina Archipelago."

That would become the starting point for the rebuilt Darklands.

We were going to save Airi.

And we would rescue Duchess Grantz as well.

There could be no better outcome than that.

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